HINDUTVA FEMINISM

GENDER, DESIRE, AND POLITICS IN AN URBAN INDIAN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is an ethnographic study of the life-worlds of middle-class Rajput Hindu women and their families living and working in a middle-class neighbor in Jaipur, Rajasthan's urban capital. I trace the development of a unique middle-class feminine political subjectivity in Hindu India alongside the emergence of a form of "Hindutva feminism" that marries the rhetoric of international gender development with the majoritarian, anti-Muslim, caste-ambiguous language of the historical Hindu nationalist movement. I argue that the development of a middle-class Hindu national feminist political subjectivity reflects larger patterns of self-making occurring in in the contemporary Hindu nationalist movement. This self-making blends the contemporary desires involved in developing the individual self, the self in the context of a rapidly socially and technologically changing world, and the role of women in building the modern world with Hindu nationalist rhetorics that reify Brahminical patriarchy and prioritize Hindu women as the symbolic cultural "hearts" of the imagined Hindu *rashtra* (state). As women deploy this strategic marriage of identities, they provide the structural backbone for the legitimatized use of violence against Muslims and others who threaten Hindu homogeneity and the preservation of *savarna* (high-caste) patriarchy.

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INTRODUCTION

I arrived in Jaipur for the first time in the sweltering heat of the summer of 2015. I was twenty-three years old, one year out of my undergraduate degree and one year into my Master's degree, intending to commence a serious study of classical Hindustani in order to further a potential project on the romantic—to me—world of nineteenth-century Hindu-Muslim syncretism. Although Jaipur was not as well-known as the northern cities of Lucknow and Agra for its contributions to the *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* (the genteel interfaith culture of northern Indian cities), the famed eighteenth-century Walled City, with its elegantly laid-out streets, artists' ateliers, and reputation for refinement, seemed like an excellent place to delve into the high culture of my chosen period of study.

If I wanted to conduct research into the positive relationship between Hindus and Muslims in urban North India, I could not have picked a worse time to arrive in the country. Narendra Modi, the unabashedly Hindu nationalist leader of the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had been swept into power the year before on a wave of popular support for his techno-populist policies, and the growing authoritarian tenor of *Modi raj* (Modi's rule) was already apparent in the culture. It was impossible to look away from the visual landscape of Modi's mass appeal, and the expertise with which he integrated his policies into every level of daily life. Mahatma Gandhi's trademark round glasses, a symbol of the Modi government's hallmark *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Campaign) scheme, appeared on the banknotes I withdrew from the ATM, and on billboards Modi's face smiled down on, and surveilled, commuters and loiterers. My last visit to India had been on a college exchange three years earlier, and I was shocked by how quickly and the seeming ubiquity with which not just the BJP, but Modi himself, had taken control of the entirety of Indian public life. I had spent time studying Hindu

nationalism as an undergraduate, just after Modi had become Prime Minister, but I was drawn in by the visual landscape of his regime, and, more importantly, how little opposition to Modi I encountered amongst the Indians I knew in Jaipur. Predominantly members of the merchant middle class that had long sustained Jaipur's heritage industries, they, much like Modi himself, balanced an allegiance to a Hindu nationalist ideology that prioritized traditional organization of society as a social and cultural good with an interest in the technological development and advancement that was meant to catapult India into its natural role as a global leader, commanding the respect from other large and powerful states that they truly deserved.

This tension was particularly apparent amongst young Jaipurites, with whom I spent the bulk of my time. They had unabashedly embraced Modi as a figurehead who would bring about the social changes that many high-caste, middle-class young people saw as critical to their success in a young country that had high youth unemployment and little upward mobility for most of its young citizens. As Jeffrey et. al. has demonstrated (2007), this economic state of being has done much to shape the gender expression and political subjectivities of underemployed young men in North India, but I was interested in its impact on women, since I had been initiated into the social world of young women in Jaipur almost as soon as I had arrived. The extreme heat, along with a series of concurrent illnesses, meant that I spent much of the summer of 2015 indoors with my landlady Aarti Rathod, who was then in her late forties, her daughter Janaki, her sister-in-law Divya, and Divya's daughter Pooja.

The Rathods were Rajputs who had once held substantial land holdings around Champa Gaon, a mid-sized agricultural village in the rural southern district of Tonk. Because they had had the patronage of the former royal family of Jaipur, the Rathods also owned a large city house (*haveli*) in Jaipur's Laxmi Gardens, a small neighborhood not far from the royal family's former

palace. The *haveli,* now the Rathod family's primary residence, became the center of my anthropological and social world in Jaipur. The men of the household—Aarti's husband Narayan Singh, his younger brother Dev Pratap who was married to Divya, Aarti and Narayan Singh's son Sukhi, and Dev Pratap and Divya's son Veer—were often out of town on business or socializing with friends outside of the house, which made the *haveli* a centrally feminine world. From my frequent interactions with the Rathod women, my interest in how middle-class women, diverse in age but closely connected through familial and caste ties, were thinking about their private and public worlds became a central focus of my research.

Janaki, Pooja, and I were roughly the same age, and we shared many of the same interests—clothes, boys, makeup, dancing, Instagram, and watching television. I would spend much of each day "doing timepass" with them, sitting in a cool back bedroom together to avoid the brutal sun. There was a certain frivolity to our interactions, united in a shared language of young global womanhood, mediated by a shared culture of memes and behaviors learned from social media. When the three of us went out, we took long, gossipy walks together on the quiet, tree-lined streets around the Rathod family compound, or strolled up to the nearby neighborhood of Jai Singh Enclave to buy ice cream, which we had to eat quickly to keep it from melting down our arms. At night, we lazed around listening to Arijit Singh and Nicki Minaj and talking about our aspirations. All three of us longed for self-actualization—jobs we could be proud of, a nice partner, a sense of satisfaction when we went to bed at night. In those moments I felt very strongly that what connected us, beyond even our shared interests, was our sense of want, our longing, that was then striking many young women across the world. We found ourselves open to a dizzying array of future possibilities, without any sense of how we could feasibly achieve them.

In this sense, Janaki and Pooja both occupied unique positions as the globalized daughters of a household that was always self-consciously referential of the past. Like many high-status Rajput families in Rajasthan, the Rathods were deeply invested in the cultivation and retention of their caste identity, and particularly their caste identity as it was expressed as a symbol of cultural refinement and proximity to royal power. Because women in particular are seen as embodiments of cultural identity in the postcolonial context, as nationalism contra the colonial state took root (see Chatterjee 1989, Chakrabarty 1992, and Sarkar 2001) this cultivation was often the special provenance of the Rathod women, who manifested it by dressing "according to caste"[1] and practicing *ghunghat,* or female seclusion, which had once been a hallmark of North Indian elites regardless of religious and caste identity. Marriages, as in any caste economy, were tightly controlled (Chowdhry 2007) as a function of the patriarchal dominance of caste; yet the actions of preserving caste through marital and sexual relations was almost entirely the provenance of women. Aarti and Divya's attentions were almost constantly on the appropriateness of the matches that were contracted for their daughters, and discussions amongst the women of the household frequently centered on the success and failure of marriages within the family and the importance of finding an "*achcha sa* match" (a good match) for sons and daughters.

What Aarti and Divya saw as guarantees for their daughters' good futures, Janaki and Pooja saw as evidence of their provincialism and refusal to reject the space of the domestic for entrance into public life. Aarti and Divya's lives, as married Rajput women who had a claim to

[1] Married women amongst the Rathod family and their friends almost universally wore *poshak,* also called *Rajputi poshak* or *Rajputi dress.* Although it is associated with Rajput castes, it is worn by women throughout Rajasthan and surrounding states and consists of a loose-fitting hip- or knee-length blouse (*kurti*), an ankle-length full skirt *(ghaghara)* and a scarf *(odhni* or *chunari*) tucked into the waistband of the skirt, drawn across the body and pinned to the shoulder, with the loose end of the scarf drawn over the hair and face in the presence of male elders. Married women preferred this dress to the saree and salwar kameez—"this is what we royal women wear," one woman matter-of-factly informed me.

noble titles, were constrained by the obligations of caste, particularly in their free movement throughout the household and the city. Both Pooja and Janaki, who were then unmarried, were uncomfortable at the idea of living the same kinds of lives as their mothers, which Pooja, the more openly critical of the two cousins, characterized as "small." The story Pooja told me about the young adulthoods of her mother and aunt—that they were beautiful, vivacious, educated women whose natural talents had been repressed through the expectations of Rajput womanhood, wifehood, and motherhood—became the narrative against which they engaged in their own self-fashioning, even as they espoused respect for and dedication to the genteel customs of high-status Rajputs. Being Rajput, after all, gave them a certain status both in Jaipur and in their natal village; when they visited Champa Gaon the villagers touched their feet and made gifts of sweets and fine clothing, and in Jaipur they enjoyed proximity to power as members of the socially, culturally, and politically dominant local caste networks. Yet there was a clear disconnect between the social power they enjoyed as women affiliated to the patriarchal power of caste and the social power they might otherwise enjoy as "modern" Indian women. The modern Indian woman was still attached to caste—it provided the social leverage she needed to attain success—but these attachments were less local and more global, with privilege affording her not just respect in the village and in the panchayat hall, but on an international stage as a self-actualized and self-determined woman, as comfortable on the public stage as she was at home.

When I returned to the Rathod house at the start of my fieldwork in late 2018, the landscape of the family had changed considerably, and these concerns were more acutely felt and enacted. Everyone was older, and the obligations of domestic responsibility had divided our girl gang. Janaki had married in November 2017 and had departed to live with her husband and in-laws in the posh upwardly mobile neighborhood of Padmini Nagar, in a family that practiced an

especially strict form of *ghunghat,* and she was responsible for the maintenance of her marital household as the newest and youngest daughter-in-law. Pooja had attained her BA and an MBA and was studying for a law degree, hoping to get a position in the Jaipur branch of the Rajasthan High Court. Veer, Pooja's older brother, had gone to Bangalore to work as an engineer for the services conglomerate Tata, and Sukhi, the baby of the house, had started studying for his BA. Narayan Singh, now semi-retired, had dedicated most of his time to building a modernized addition the *haveli* that allowed the family to take in more boarders and increase their household income, and new technologies like broadband internet and a smart television increased the family's contact with the world of global media. Yet, despite (or perhaps because of) these new things and these life changes, the desires and longings of the Rathod women were more apparent than ever. What I did notice was a significant change in the tenor of those desires and longings. Whereas the desires that Pooja and I had shared with each other three years earlier had been the consumptive desires of girls just finished with being teenagers, when I spoke with her, she increasingly articulated a political, and angry, longing for social and public advancement.

The whole house buzzed with a tense energy that seemed to reflect the energy of the country. 2018 and 2019 were years of extreme change for India; Modi's populist-cum-technocratic government had reached the zenith of its influence. The demonetization of high-value banknotes in November 2016 was a new policy of anti-corruption that signified, for the young people living in the Rathod house, a sea change indicating that Modi sought to upend corruption in every area of life. Violence against Muslims in Rajasthan had increased, particularly in rural areas; 2017 and 2018 had an especially high number of cow vigilante attacks and lynchings of Muslim and Dalit men suspected of illegally transporting beef. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, a number of events significant to the Modi government's consolidation

of authoritarian power occurred—the Pulwama attack in February 2019, in which a convoy of Indian security personnel was attacked by a suicide bomb in Jammu and Kashmir, followed by the capture and daring rescue of the Indian pilot Abhinandan, who had been shot down over Pakistan-administrated Kashmir less than two weeks after the Pulwama attack. In August 2019, the Modi government revoked the special autonomous status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, reverting Kashmir to Union Territory status and putting India's only Muslim-majority territory under considerably more federal oversight, with plans for severe economic redevelopment married with a crackdown on political and social dissidents in the region, including a block on telecommunications that prevented average Kashmiris from disseminating what was going on the Valley to the world. The emergent crisis over the National Register of Citizens/Citizenship Amendment Act, a legal strategy of the Modi government that sought to disenfranchise millions of Indian Muslims, was at a low-level thrum and would come to a head in January of 2020, after I had returned to the United States.

The anger that Pooja felt was tempered by a kind of righteousness—a reassurance that the actions of the Modi government were correct and in the service of the nation—and a kind of glee, an enjoyment *(mazaa)* that was matched by others in the household, as if desires were finally being fulfilled. And indeed, as we discussed the political goings-on in the country, their articulation of their politics focused on Modi as a wish-granter, who sought to fulfill their desires, particularly their desires for political and social dominance and an easier integration of themselves as upper-caste, lower-middle-class to middle-class Hindus and as modern agentive citizens. The tension that had spurred my interlocutors to articulate a sense of hopelessness and lack of fulfillment was giving way to a self-assurance that their liberation was ensconced in the authoritarian regime of Modi's BJP, which was then undertaking strategies of repression to

restore an India that would reshape Pooja and the women in her family as firmly rooted in the upper-caste patriarchy that allowed them social dominance in the realm of the domestic, but equally at home as dominators on the global stage. Girl wants the world, girl gets it.

Hindutva Feminisms

This thesis explores the micro-level conditions for the emergence of what has been termed "Hindutva feminism," an outwardly-directed and gendered politics rooted in the reshaping of the Hindu woman as an agentive political being (Mangurkar and Ramaswamy 2022, Sunder Rajan 1998, Sunder Rajan 2001, Singh 2016, Narula 2018). While Hindutva exists as a right-wing ideology where women are frequently marginal, there is a long history of women's participation in the Hindu nationalist movement, and this participation has been frequently marked by women's attempts to assert an agentive self in organizing and enacting Hindutva ideology and praxis. Hindu nationalist women have long memories; women involved in Hindu nationalist organizing in urban North India look to figures like Jijabai, the mother of the 18th-century anti-Mughal Maratha hero Shivaji, as their historical "foremothers;" Kalyani Menon (2005) writes that such attributions create a "cultural memory" that opens up spaces for a kind of feminist orientation within Hindutva—a feminism that is not predicated on solidarity amongst women so much as the formation of the female individual as a striving, and public, subject empowered to take on autonomous action, and locates women as historical agents of anti-Muslim, pro-Hindu political action. Despite Hindu nationalist women's assertions that such a role always existed, the Hindutva feminist fully emerges as a legible subject in the immediate pre-liberalization and post-liberalization periods.

Beginning in the late 1980s, as Sucheta Mazumdar (1995) has described, women's public participation in Hindu nationalist organizing skyrocketed, with women appearing publically in marches and political rallies. This increase in public participation corresponded to an increase in women's literacy in urban North India; literate middle-class women, often devoutly religious, found the familiar imagery of the 1980s Hindu nationalist movement (Lord Rama, Durga, Bharat Mata) more accessible than the left-wing secularism of the Indian feminist intelligentsia. The Hindu nationalist element of the period encouraged these connections, seizing onto readings in religious studies that declared "the Hindu goddess" a "feminist," reinforcing a form of feminism that prioritized Brahminical religion as a foundational element of how women should see themselves (Sunder Rajan 2001, 37). For upper-caste women raised in Brahminical cosmologies, seeing themselves as a fierce, avenging Kali or Durga, fighting on behalf of the Hindu nation, was both empowering and familiar. Led by a new sense of self, Hindu nationalist women seized onto the fierce and violent rhetoric of the movement during this period in order to claim a public selfhood and from there a form of agency. These women, experiencing the disorienting aftereffects of modernity as much as Hindu nationalist men did, also sought to increase women's participation in nationalist organizing as a form of social care; women utilized nationalist organizing methods to reform and restructure the private space of the home, reforming the earlier postcolonial idea of women as repositories of cultural knowledge in the domestic sphere to "bring the war home" in their social relations with their families and networks of kinship (Menon 2012, Bedi 2012).

The development of this form of agency took on increasingly militant strains. Paola Bachetta (2004) has explored the rhetorical strategies of members of the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (Committee of National Women Volunteers), the largest Hindu nationalist women's paramilitary

organization. Samiti women have strategically utilize selected religious and historical symbols, particularly images of the goddesses Kali and Durga and historical figures such as the anti-colonial figure Laxmibai, to create a counternarrative of strong, self-sufficient, and active nationalist women. This allows them to designate a place for themselves in active Hindu nationalist organizing, and to selectively resist certainly gendered assumptions made by men in the Swayamsevak Sangh about the nature of Hindu womanhood. Women utilize these symbols to avoid marriage, to self-determine dress and appearance, and to move about urban spaces as one wishes without threat of impropriety or harassment. Tarini Bedi (2017) has similarly demonstrated how "political matronage" has served to make new forms of public power for female members of the Maratha chauvinist group Shiv Sena in urban Maharashtra; her work on the strategies of these women challenges conventional understandings of Hindu nationalism as lacking a space for political womanhood. In these forms of Hindu nationalist womanhood described above, women existed as contra to or parallel to the nominally secular Indian state; it was against the state, with its policies of minority appeasement and reservation, that the early Hindutva feminists organized. They sought to legitimize their anger with the state by appealing to the ontological foundations of the Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu state) as they saw it—a fierce femininity predicated on revenge, reform, and above all else naked and holy violence.

Hindu nationalism in the era of Narendra Modi, with its attendant attentions to the universal language of empowerment, women's economic participation, and the enabling of the middle classes, calls into question the idea of Hindutva feminism as it currently exists. As Ishra Mangulkar and Nimmi Rangaswamy (2022) have shown, much of Hindutva feminism as it exists in the age of Modi is tantamount to a "controlled empowerment of women," in which Hindutva conceptions of women's self-actualization is limited to a sublimation to the religious and caste

concerns of the overall movement (171). By contrasting two feminist touchpoints in greater Indian discourse—the triple talaq debate and the court case regarding menstruating women's entry in the Sabarimala Ayyappan temple in Kerala—they demonstrate the limitations of Hindutva feminism and its capacity for self-critique or development beyond the larger ideological orientation of the movement.[2] Limited by its own insistence on Hindutva as a guiding structure for everyday life, women who sought to push against the boundaries of everyday religious and caste practices could no longer occupy the tension

When Hindu nationalism no longer exists as marginal or counter to the state, but in fact constitutes the ideological and practical orientation of the state as a whole, what role does this legacy of women's agency present in the space of the paramilitary camp and the organizing meeting play in understanding Hindutva feminism as it currently exists? I argue that, in its current valence, Hindutva feminism continues to reject the politically and socially left-wing feminism that has characterized the larger Indian women's movement since Independence, but in turn also rejects earlier notions of nationalist womanhood as predicated on the negotiation of the self as primarily a cultural repository, into which Hindu nationalist men poured their collective rages and anxieties. It has moved away from the figures of the fierce Kali and Durga, or the noble Jijabai, towards the glittering figure of Nita Ambani—a woman who embodies the desires of the Hindutva technocratic state, who does not exist contra to the state as her foremothers did, but has been fully integrated into the state's rhetoric of striving, empowerment, and legitimation

[2] Mangulkar and Rangaswamy conducted a content analysis of tweets related to the Supreme Court decisions on the Muslim practice of triple talaq, which had been critiqued by Hindutva feminist as representative of Islam's oppression of women, and on the ban on women of reproductive age from entering the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, due to a taboo against the presence of menstruating women in the inner sanctum of the bachelor deity Ayyappan. Mangulkar and Rangaswamy note that arguments against Muslim social practices levied by Hindutva women were reversed in their discussions of Sabarimala—while triple talaq was evidence of oppressive religion preventing the exercise of secularity, the Sabarimala ban was seen as essential respect for religion, with women who supported the ban exalted as ideal Hindu female practitioners, fighting against the intrusion of secularism into religious practice.

of violence on an international scale. In this way, as Roohi Narula (2018) has written, Hindutva feminism of the current moment more closely resembles the "white feminism" of the West, which is legitimated by and co-constituted with state power as a way to empower some elite women, belonging to certain social orders, at the expensive of marginal women who are unable to access this feminist ideal. Hindutva feminism does not take up, as Narula also notes, issues of caste or class empowerment as it relates to forms of Dalit, queer, and working women's feminism that have long existed in independent India; it is unconcerned with sisterhood. This has allowed left-wing feminists in India to question if Hindutva feminism has any feminist elements *at all* (Singh 2016); nevertheless, the state feminism that today's Hindutva feminism references exists across the democratic world and relies on individual empowerment while eliding class, caste, and racial privileges that makes right-wing feminists have access to the rhetoric of empowerment in the first place.

If, as Rajeswari Sundar Rajan has argued, that the "scandal" of the Indian state is its refusal to legitimate and integrate women as full rights-bearing citizens (2008), perhaps the Hindutva feminist of the current moment seeks to get her bearings with the new power she wields. One no longer need be a paramilitary woman to identify as a Hindutva feminist, but the new Hindutva feminist, legitimized by the state's rhetoric of womanhood and development, is no less dangerous. I further argue that the development of this particular brand of Hindutva feminism is rooted in attempts to reconcile competing desires and longings within women who subscribe to it—both a desire to retain the social power and privilege afforded to them as players within upper-caste patriarchy and a desire to emerge as politically, socially, erotically, and personally agentive beings. The development of this striving, ambitious, and reactionary feminism has powerful implications for the further development of the Hindu nationalist project

in contemporary India and links it to other forms of right-wing feminism developed throughout the world during the contemporary populist moment, when right-wing movements from the United States to the United Kingdom to Brazil and beyond have articulated reactionary feminism predicated on the violent enforcement of gendered experience upon the bodies of the marginal. This thesis recovers India as an important site of this global movement of reactionary, violent self-making, and asks: what are the desires, dreamings, fantasies, and articulations that lead women to identify as both feminists, with all the international trappings that word holds, *and* as nationalists who see a violent fascism as the only way for (some) women to attain true liberation?

In my interviews and discussions with the Rathod women and their relatives and friends, all expressed feelings and exhibited symptoms of depression, anxiety and panic, and of detachment from other household members, including husbands, sisters, and children. Fear of one's own sexuality and the sexuality of other women emerged from these feelings of detachment, as did resentment towards husbands, other male relatives, and higher-status female relatives and female in-laws. Relationships between mothers and daughters, as well as sisters-in-law, were particularly fraught, with periods of extreme closeness and intimacy coexisting with periods of mutual anger and alienation. Such ebbs and flows in sociality reflect historical patterns of intimate life amongst Hindu and Muslim women in joint families (Sangari 2002, Osella 2012), but also mirror new forms of sociality produced by changes in the household form as a result of globalization, particularly within relationships mediated by age (as in the case of mothers and daughters) and by differing economic statuses (in the case of sisters-in-law). Younger women in particularly described feelings of being out of step with women's culture in India as a result of their seclusion and reduced economic circumstances; clothing, food, music,

and media consumption, along with the ability to move through public spaces, became important parts of young women's self-fashioning as "modern" and "stylish." The perceived social pressure of maintaining the illusion of modernity, emphasized by messaging from television, magazines, and online content, added to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety amongst secluded women.

Despite these feelings of inadequacy, sadness, and anxiety, along with relatively low rates of participation in public life, all the women of these families were passionately political, and spoke of themselves as subjects who took an active interest in the political and public life of the nation. Women spoke with passionate approval of the impact of Narendra Modi's rule on the lives of the middle classes, on the importance of programs designed to foster women's economic participation, and the supposed importance of ending religiously-based personal law codes for women's full empowerment and equality. Although many women, particularly young women, self-described as feminists based on their support for further entrance of women into public life and their support of gender empowerment schemes, they also articulated a politics predicated upon the violent exclusion of Dalit and Muslim women, including the active advocacy of violence against women in Kashmir, on poor and minority women who suffered unduly from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Dalit women who worked menial jobs in the neighborhood and often faced the brunt of social and sexual violence. These women set themselves apart from other women who could be legitimate objects of violence through a self-description as "average," "normal," or *"seedhi-saadhi"* ("simple and straightforward"); they are therefore considered to be both undeserving of violence and presumed to be acting on behalf of the Indian nation when they enact violence against others. In this way, legitimate wifehood, motherhood, and daughterhood is both a protective force against intimate and social violence *and*

the positionalities from which the political selves of secluded women are contested. As Dworkin (1983) contends, this positionality legitimizes right-wing women as political actors, while at the same time setting them apart from other women's movements that speak from a non-majoritarian position. Yet this positionality has a private element; it is rooted in the desire to resist oppression within the household and build satisfying conjugal and intimate relationships within family and social networks by articulating the self as a person inherently worthy of respect and capable of self-determination. Thus, this assertion of the political self is rooted in the quotidian experience of private life that is put into action in the public sphere.

India's 21st-Century Transnational Nationalism

India is one of the first of the major world democracies to bring an authoritarian government to power in the 21st century, having brought Narendra Modi to power in 2014. Although "the world's largest democracy" has a history of authoritarian rule in the later part of the 20th century (Jalal 1995), Modi's government brought together two ways of doing politics that would later be reflected in the authoritarian governments of other major democracies from Brazil to the United States—majoritarian populist social policy predicated on the violent exclusion of racial, sexual, and caste minorities alongside neoliberal economic policy that emphasized globalization, global free trade, and deregulation. Despite slow economic growth during the first Modi government, the 2019 Lok Sabha elections saw the BJP win an even more decisive victory than it had in 2014, picking up twenty-one seats in the lower house of the Indian parliament and securing a mandate for Modi's social policies. Modi also enjoys a high-level of support from the Indian diaspora, which sustains his government financially and advocates for his interests in the halls of power in other large democracies; the United States has enjoyed a

particularly close relationship with Modi's BJP government, with President Donald Trump appearing on stage with him at a large event in Houston, a key city for America's Indian diaspora, in 2019. Modi's popularity with the Indian diaspora was reflected in Trump's active courtship of the leader; Modi enjoyed an approval rating of 82% amongst Indians in the late summer of 2019, and Trump hoped to make inroads with the Indian diaspora by appearing onstage with such a beloved—if controversial—leader of the global authoritarian movement (India Today 2019).

Why, despite slow economic development and the undue hardship that policies like the 2016 demonetization of large-denomination bank notes place on the average Indian, are Modi and his policies so massively popular amongst the Indian middle classes? My close ethnographic analysis of the political self-makings and aspirations of middle-class women reveals the myriad sources from which right-wing women draw their sense of self, and how the construction of that self leads to the adoption of a majoritarian politics. I particularly emphasize the cultivation of political joy and desire in women's right-wing politics, predicated on the experience of *mazaa* (enjoyment) and *masti* (pleasure) found in 'doing' violent politics that can alleviate experiences of fear, anxiety, and subjugation. While Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi (2010) has described the enmeshment of pleasure and rage in the enactment of violence in the context of communal riots, I choose to focus on how these feelings develop within populations that do not practice physical violence but provide the tacit social permission necessary for such violence to occur and become acceptable to many members of the Hindu political public.

Women play a special role in providing this social permission. Much of the Modi government's anti-Muslim policy has focused on issues of gender and women's empowerment, designed to frame Muslim women as passive and oppressed, a foil to the Hindu woman, who is

presumed to be liberated and politically aware. This framing can be found in the discourse around the Modi government's ban on the *teen talaq* (informal Islamic divorce) as a way of liberating oppressed Muslim wives, and in the rhetoric surrounding the revocation of special status for the state of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, which was alleged to free Kashmiri women from the economic and sexual machinations of Kashmiri men, allowing non-Kashmiri, non-Muslim men to become economic actors in the region (and thus, it is implied, have sexual access to Kashmiri women). The passage of the Citizens Amendment Act and the implementation of the National Register of Citizens in January 2020, and the jailing of Kashmiri opposition politicians and Dalit dissidents, signify the Modi's government's continuing anti-Muslim, anti-Dalit policy priorities.

By focusing on the political subjectivities of right-wing middle-class women in India, I draw attention to a group that has not been adequately accounted for either in studies of the development of right-wing politics generally nor in feminist political analysis. Studies of right-wing women in India have typically been solely focused on paramilitary women or women involved in formal political organizing (Basu 1996, Menon 2012, Bedi 2017), with relatively little attention paid to the political subjectivities of women outside formal organizations like the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti or the Durga Vahini. More broadly, right-wing women receive far less study by feminist researchers, despite the historical existence of forms of right-wing feminism and the growing alliance between forms of imperial feminism and the global right-wing. Dworkin (1983) made groundbreaking philosophical studies of the social conditions of right-wing American women, and Bachetta and Power (2002) and Blee and Deutsch (2012) have made important contributions to the study of right-wing women in the transnational context. More recently, McGirr (2012), Schreiber (2008), and Darby (2020) have done significant studies of

how right-wing white women in the United States developed and deployed political consciousness in the realms of Republican Party organizing and white supremacist networks. Yet analysis of the material conditions of right-wing women—that is, the granular details of quotidian existence and how it aids in the formulation of a political consciousness—remains relatively understudied, particularly in feminist scholarship. While my interest is in the development of a gendered Indian right-wing political consciousness, the material conditions that produce such a consciousness find parallels in many parts of the world, from the glitzy pageantry of Women for Trump in the United States to the anti-trans mothers' networks in the United Kingdom. The allegiance between gendered domesticity—the valorization of wifehood and motherhood—and the larger global right-wing movements is not new; however, the myriad reasons why women seek out and find comfort in such political selves, even as they attempt to and do subvert many of the ideals that these forms of politics uplift, have powerful implications for understanding the rise of and continued long-term health of majoritarian movements globally.

On Hindu Women's Nationalism

The popular image of the Hindu nationalist, particularly in international media, is that of the young masculine *pracharak* (party worker) setting boldly forth as a single man, or allied with a band of like-minded brothers, to defend the Hindu nation from the incursions of Muslims, Indian Christians, and leftists who would seek to taint its purity. Indeed, much of the development of Indian nationalism, especially as expressed in historical and political scholarship on the subject, has focused on its origins as a masculine and masculinizing entity. Mrinalini Sinha (1995) has located the origins of Indian nationalism's gender critique as one rooted in the anxiety of the "effeminate" Bengali *babu* (middle-class clerk) over his masculinity compared to

the martial strength of the British, while Rochana Majumdar (2009) has traced the development of the companionate nationalist marriage, with the husband as its public face and the wife as its private self, to a similar anxiety over the cultivation of modernizing values in the Indian family for both men and women. The question of the development of a Hindu nationalist femininity, and the ways in which Hindu nationalism has shaped the gender identities of Indian women, has largely been relegated to a femininity *contra* masculinity. In Majumdar's study of Bengali families at the end of the nineteenth century, the development of the nationalist marriage was primarily being about a masculine self-fashioning; women were valued for their embodiment of "traditional" (or nationalist conception thereof) values that reflected the domestic success of the anti-colonial movement. The single *pracharak* therefore emerged as a repository for the anxieties of the middle-class nationalist householder, but so too did the nationalist wife, whose conduct was beyond reproach and challenged British perceptions of the Indian family as disorganized, unclean, and un-modern (Chakrabarty 1992). Thus, what became constituted in the nationalist movement as the "ideal Hindu woman" (saree-clad, educated but demure, preoccupied with the rearing of Hindu children and the preservation of the domestic sphere) is a modern discursive creation, a product of the encounter with the colonial regime and the nationalist refashioning of India, and Hindu culture, as homogeneous, bourgeois, and rational according to the standards of the colonial social state.

As Chatterjee (1989), Chakrabarty (1992), Sarkar (2001), Sunder Rajan (2003), Pinney (2004), and Ramaswamy (2010) have shown, middle-class women were active participants from the very beginning of the nationalist movement in India, although they often existed as political objects onto which the idealized Indian nation was projected—the symbolic embodiments of India's cultural power and superiority. Their realm was in private life, in the nationalist home,

rather than as active participants in politics. Some middle-class women were able to successfully and non-controversially enter public life as the wives and family members of prominent nationalist men, but working-class women in public (such as the actress, the sex worker, and the labor leader) were seen as not just offensive to conventional morality, but actively detrimental to the nationalist cause. This dichotomy persisted through independence and through the beginnings of the contemporary Hindu nationalist movement in the late 1980s, which was co-constituted with the emergence of a middle-class political subjectivity in North India.

This was a form of politics that emerged concurrent with and intertwined with the development of the Indian middle-class self. Indira Gandhi's Emergency, the repression of dissident parties in the 1970s, and the emergence of anti-Congress political parties in the late 1970s, along with social changes in the 1980s such as the Mandal Commission Report[3] and the subsequent riots after its implementation in 1990, cleared the way for the formation of a post-liberalization high-caste, middle-class volatile political movement, which married older forms of majoritarian Indian nationalism with economic policies promoting globalization, private capitalism, and technological innovation that had the potential to increase the fortunes of the emergent middle classes (Mayaram 1992, Jalal 1996, Shani 2005, Fernandes 2006, Shani 2007). The majoritarian nature of the nationalistic aspects of this social movement, born from the aftermath of the Mandal Commission riots and the Bharatiya Janata Party's 1992 Ram Janki Rath Yatra to Ayodhya, precluded Muslim and Dalit women's political participation, but created

[3] The Mandal Commission Report of 1980, which was based on a study commissioned by Prime Minister Moraji Desai in 1979, was intended to establish recommended caste-based quotas for public sector jobs, recommending a 22.5% employment quota for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (castes and tribes given special protections in the Indian Constitution) and a 27% reservation for the poorly-defined Other Backward Castes (OBCs) who were not considered necessarily oppressed castes but who had markedly lower rates of economic prosperity and education compared to "forward castes." Attempts to implement the Commission's reports in 1990 led to weeks of rioting across many major cities in North India by high-caste students and government workers; high-caste students who self-immolated in Delhi in September 1990 became martyrs of anti-Mandal politics and for the high-caste, middle-class cause (Guha 2017).

new forms of political selfhood for high-caste Hindu women. Such women could adopt fiery woman renunciants like Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara as their role models; or else the BJP parliamentarian and royal widows Gayatri Devi and Vijaya Raje Scindia, whose demure appearances and noble lineages distinguished them from their saffron-clad political sisters. Yet Bharati and Rithambara had a special status as celibate religious women, and Gayatri Devi and Scindia were widows, former queens, whose reproductive capacities and wifely honor were no longer relevant. Renunciant or celibate women, who occupied spaces outside of the prescribed nationalist ideal for householding women, were more accepted into the militant and politically organized factions of the movement. For other women, access to the nationalist project came in ways that were associated primarily through the concurrent trend of economic liberalization, and the new kinds of selfhoods the new economy created. Married women and mothers, who had less access to this form of political engagement, could seek out subjectivity and selfhood through their experiences of class and through the acquisition of new forms of commodities that came to signify self-actualization, modernity, and class striving.

The Indian Middle Class

I take up the political subjectivities of middle-class women as part of a lineage of academic scholarship on the Indian middle class, its relationship to the process of economic liberalization in the 1990s, and its political activation as a discrete bloc (Breckenridge 1995, Munshi 1998, Fernandes 2006, Blom Hansen 2001, Derne 2008, Munshi 2010, Mazzarella 2013, Baviskar and Ray 2015, Mankekar 2015). Following Blom Hansen (2001), I agree that Hindu nationalism as it existed in India after the 1980s is primarily a discursive tradition, located in the realm of the public sphere. Hansen argues against readings within South Asian Studies that argue

that Hindu nationalism emerged either as a result of party machinations within the political sphere or as a descendant of preexisting religious narratives which had been part of Indian nationalism from its founding. Rather, he argues that democracy, with its breakdown of previously held identities and relational ties and its emphasis on citizen rights and entitlements, allows for the kinds of chaotic self-remaking (with attendant anxieties over identity and national belonging) and open-ended public culture that enables Hindu nationalism to emerge as a viable political discourse. Because Hindu nationalism was able to address both the longing for a return to traditional ways of being for its middle-class base and their desire for global recognition and engagement with larger narratives of universal liberal rights and globalization, it ultimately proved a significant political force in Indian public life. Hansen's framing, for me, draws attention to the kinds of selfhoods that emerge as a result of the institution of democracy in India, and furthermore the ways in which the emergence of the public sphere and a widespread public discourse on the nation allows for certain forms of populist nationalisms to emerge and spread both through the machines that public culture makes possible and as a traditionalist space of relocation for unmoored identities after the changes in political governance after democratization.

The "middle-class revolution" that marked post-liberalization India, where new classes of people entered into the white-collar workforce and enjoyed standards of living that allowed them to participate in global capitalism, was, according to Steve Derne (2008), nevertheless uneven and incomplete in its production of a "transnational middle class." The economic reforms instituted by the government of PV Narasimha Rao in 1991, and the delinking of private sector businesses from the bureaucratic system of *license raj* that had slowed foreign investment and the growth of private capital, had created fabulous wealth for those who were socially and

culturally equipped to move in globalized circles, but were largely disenchanting for those who could not reach the upper echelons of social power (*Free Press Journal* 2019). Derne instead argues that those Indians who came to be defined as and who self-defined as members of such a transnational class were largely those who were already affluent; he questions academic literature that sees English-speaking, highly educated urban dwellers who consume imported media and goods and non-English-speakers who do not have access to transnational markers of class (such as living in gated colonies, travel, or conspicuous consumption of foreign goods) as part of one contiguous "emergent" middle class in India (40). The lack of structural change that globalization brought to the lives of the non-elite middle classes have led to resistance against changes in gender relations brought about by globalization, though he looks at these changes only through the discourses of non-elite middle-class men, who continue to hold on to traditional family structures, that, Derne argues, "benefit" non-elite men by clearly delineating family and masculine spaces, in which they may engage in masculinized discourses of sexuality and bravado (131). He also argues that the Hindi film industry, as opposed to Western film cultures, promote traditional family life as an essentially Indian value; Indian actors of all genders frequently discuss family and marriage as a way of reifying this. Thus, non-elite middle-class Indians whose media consumption is largely in vernacular languages come to see these values reflected in their media consumption.

As Lisa Rofel (2007) has discussed, the consumptive nature of contemporary economic participation—buying particular goods to signify one's social class or aspirational social class, the mediation of interpersonal relationships according to how they are shown on screen, and the cultivating of the public self through wanting—is key to forming what she calls "desiring subjects"—contemporary political actors who locate their active personhood in the things they

desire, acquire, and accept as their own. Internal desire, and the desire that individuals see reflected at them from the shimmering mirrors of global capital, are key in delineating moderns, whose desires are shaped and reformed by these globalized, capitalized forces. I am interested in the desiring subjectivities of women as part of the making of new discursive selves, in which women are both participants and objects of this discipline of desire. If, as Derne argues, non-elite men are served by the desires that emerge from their own disappointment at their failed liberalization, what is to be made of women in the same position? How is their perception of their gender, their subjective behavior, and their agency impacted by the experience of failed liberalization? What kinds of desires are constantly being shaped and reformed?

What Do Women Want?: Desiring Subjectivities

This thesis takes up desire, in a multitude of its expressions, as a key activating agent in women's subjectivities—as political subjects, domestic subjects, and subjects striving towards conceptions of self-actualization. Conceptions of wanting appeared over and over again as women spoke to me about their lives and motivations. And *want* was a key factor in determining how women constituted their public, private, and political selves. Women wanted nice things. They wanted nice clothes, brand-name purses, perfume, cosmetics, shoes. They wanted good-looking husbands, orgasms, Muslim boyfriends, divorces. They wanted law degrees, free time to sit and read, a business of their own. They wanted to be Instagram famous, nineteenth-century princesses, US citizens, parliamentarians. They wanted the abrogation of special status for Jammu and Kashmir, they wanted to go to war with Pakistan, they wanted the end of the reservation-based university admissions system, they wanted to burn down every Muslim-majority locality in Jaipur, with the Muslim dream-boyfriends engulfed in flames. Erotic

desiring, political desiring, economic desiring, and violent desiring coexisted and intertwined with one another as women articulated their dreams, goals, and visions of the future.

Key to the understanding of women's desiring is an understanding of how women's desires have been co-constituted with the experience of nationalism in India, particularly in the immediate period surrounding independence. Priti Ramamurthy's study (2006) of the "modern girl" or *kalaj ladki* (college-going girl) as a trope figure of 1920s India provides an example of how desires became circumscribed and sublimated to the nationalist project in the pre-independence era. The *kalaj ladki* smoked cigarettes, worked in an office, had sexual relationships with men, and raised her arms in sleeveless blouses to reveal her shaved armpits; she was a reflection of the unruly memsahibs of the nineteenth century—Indian women who rode in open carriage, smoked cigarettes, and dressed in Western clothing (Chakrabarty 1992) The Anglo-Indian actresses who appeared in the early silent film era and embodied the image of the *kalaj ladki* represented a racial and sexual ambiguity that was inconsistent with the nationalist project that was attempting to build a conservative and culturally homogeneous modernity. Thus, the *kalaj ladki* largely disappeared from the Indian mediascape following independence, replaced with figures like the demure and virginal playback singer Lata Mangeshkar and Muslim actresses like Mumtaz Jehan Begum Dehlavi, who refashioned herself into the "dream girl" Madhubala and erased any suggestion of a suspicious Muslimness.[4]

By the 1990s, the discursive production of nationalist femininity had become increasingly more global but retained elements of the earlier construction of women as cultural repositories. Yet women were more and more being reflected as economic actors, at least in the domestic space. Media and advertisements geared towards Indian women in the post-liberalization period

[4] For more on Mangeshkar as a key figure in the development of nationalist femininity during/after the independence movement, see Pavitra Sundar in *Meridians* (September 2008).

of the mid-1990s married the rhetoric of emergent feminist praxis with middle-class discourses on household organization and the family, giving educated, housebound wives and mothers an affective thrill through the lens of household economics, making purchasing pressure cookers and saris as much feminist acts as adopting birth control or working against dowry. For many middle-class women, the expansion of their roles as economic actors, along with increased rates of higher education, diminishing birth rates, and the consolidation of their class status were particularly influential in the development of their political selves (Munshi 1998). Middle-class women also increasingly saw themselves reflected in new forms of media, which brought their concerns into mainstream discourse and allowed for national conversations on the status of middle-class women. Television shows that focused on middle-class family dynamics, particularly on women's issues, became increasingly popular in Indian homes, as did Bollywood films that valorized the status of the middle-class wife and mother as a companion in the economic aspirations of the household (Dwyer 2000, Munshi 2010, Gopal 2011).

At the same time, the realm of the public could be as fraught with tension and ambivalence as the domestic sphere. While middle-class women achieved increasing prominence in the public sphere, many middle-class Indians who were unable to attain the cultural status markers of elite modernity (English fluency, multinational corporate work, entrance into elite cultural and social spaces) anxiously experienced feelings of cultural incompetency, lack of social capital, and anxiety over future changes. Such feelings are not uncommon amongst moderns (Appadurai 1996, Brenner 1998, Leichty 2002, Klenk 2004, Rofel 2007, Mankekar 2015). My interlocutors saw their political selves as emergent from the concurrent experiences of household turmoil, perceptions of social inferiority, and the desire for self-improvement.

While women's desires could be constituted as sites of critique, I am careful throughout the course of the dissertation not to equivocate desire and desirings with forms of liberatory politics that emerge from desire pe se. I do not see desire, or even love, as emotions and states of being that are inherently contradictory to the state of being that is life under fascism. Indeed, as Sara Ahmed (2016) asserts, love is perhaps the guiding principle of contemporary global fascism, as desire and love constantly shape perceptions of protection, safety, and threat. I draw attention, following Akhil Kang (2022), to the ways that desire shapes the boundaries and contours of how selves are shaped, how selves come to deploy complicated networks of kinship, national politics, caste, and political and personal self-making, and how the realm of affection, intimacy, love, and desire in all its forms can often serve as a form of social mediation that reinforces, rather than breaks, social boundaries.

On Methods

Early on in my fieldwork, I was the recipient of some critique by a fellow anthropologist, a white man also conducting research in Rajasthan, who told me that my plans to conduct a small household study in a locality that I already knew well prior to my fieldwork was cowardly. A true anthropologist, he told me, went boldly into the field, visited strange locales and jumped on motorcycles with strangers and opened (himself) up to all kinds of experiences; to fail to do so, and to merely embed myself in the domestic drudgeries of women, and women I already knew, was a test of the methodological rigor of my own ethnographic sensibility and my commitment to anthropology as a discipline. Although the phantom-anthropologist I failed to become haunted me throughout much of my fieldwork, I reject any notion of methodological rigor that privileges a masculine dominance over the field as—to use an intellectual term—bullshit.

Much has been written on the uneven experience of the field, and academia as a whole, as mediated by the researcher's race, class, and gender (see Ahmed 2006, Pollard 2009, Cvetkovich 2013, Pinto 2014, Huang 2016, Johnson 2016, Pinzer and Allison 2018) and the importance of "slow" and "small" anthropology in building equitable protocols (Faubion 2009, Pollard 2009, Cierwonka and Malkki 2007). I came to the field as a white queer fat Jewish woman with chronic physical and mental illness; there was no aspect of who I was that did not shape, in some manner, my ability to conduct this fieldwork, the way information was told to me, and how I interpreted it in the moment and later on when I attempted analysis. Rather than try to turn this experience into an account of an "always available, up-for-anything fieldworker" (Günel and Watanabe 2020), I have tried to impart some understanding of how my own vulnerability and corporeality as a "character" in the story of this work influenced the work itself.[5]

I have equally tried to avoid turning this thesis into pure autoethnography, or a meditation on the experience of working with right-wing people in the field. I have often been asked, by fellow researchers and laypeople, about the experience of working with "right-wing women," as if the specter of the right-wing woman is an aberrant and exotic figure so thoroughly unfamiliar to an academic researcher that I was incapable of feeling connection or even affection with my interlocutors. Sindre Bangstad (2017) has discussed the phenomenon of "doing ethnography among people you don't (actually) like," and questioned the ability of ethnographers to write generous and expansive accounts of the lifeworlds of extremists even in states of mutual disregard or dislike. I have found my own experience to be much more ambivalent. The truth is

[5] See, for example, Chapter One, in which I discuss struggles with migraine headaches and severe depression that emerged in the winter of 2018 and early spring of 2019, during which time I was unable to consistently complete the semi-structured interviews I had planned; Aarti meticulously cared for me during this time, and the ongoing discussion of the relationship between chronic illness and specific gendered experiences of daily living in the chapter emerges from our co-constitution as sufferers of chronic illness.

that my interlocutors were often caring, loving, and kind. They were generous with their time and energy, they cared for me both emotionally and physically, and they were relentlessly supportive of my ability to complete this project and to have a successful field experience. Our relationships with each other, rooted as they were in a mutual experience of coming to adulthood and contemplating the nature of contemporary womanhood, often transcended the boundaries of work and research. My interlocutors also openly discussed their enthusiasm for mass killings of Muslims, relentlessly enforced caste hierarchies that alienated them from their neighbors, and reinforced the structures of upper-caste Hindu patriarchy as often as they transgressed them. I was not separated from these aspects of their quotidian experiences either, and it was often assumed by my interlocutors that I held similar political and social views to them, for exactly the reasons of my positionality and my corporeality in the world. For example, I have been asked, by colleagues as well as by laypeople, how I "could possibly" conduct work with the extreme right as a Jewish woman. In the Indian case, my Jewish identity led many of my interlocutors to assume that I, too, saw Muslims as potential terrorists and dangerous interlopers. One woman was mystified that I had Muslim friends, and that I socialized regularly with my Muslim peers in the United States: "What about what they have done in Israel?" she gaped. In other cases, my interlocutors drew a comparison between the persecution of Jews in the West with what they saw as the persecution of upper-caste Hindus and Hindu practices in secular India, a thread which has also found provenance in the mainstream Hindu nationalist movement (see De Roover in *Outlook,* Feb 2022). Whenever possible, I have been open about the ways in which I was folded into these discourses and my varying attempts at mediating them, both successfully and unsuccessfully.

To write and to think about lifeworlds of women requires a multitude of ways of seeing and ways of thinking, and I have deliberately crafted an ethnographic methodology for this thesis that values the multiplicity of ways that women articulate their knowledge of themselves, their relationships, and their environment. The first ethnographic research I did for this project was embedded in the *gupshup* (idle conversation, gossip) I engaged in with Janaki and Pooja, and eventually Aarti and Divya, which was informal and loosely structured. The American anthropologist Renato Rosaldo characterized this methodological style (later appropriated by Clifford Geertz) as "deep hanging out" (Rosaldo 1994). Because of the nature of my initial relationship with the girls and women in the Rathod family, as well as my own experience of young womanhood and the philosophical and intellectual richness that I had encountered in the conversations I had with friends and comrades when "merely" "hanging out." I also sought to allow my interlocutors to, wherever possible, guide the nature and patterns of our conversations, and the structure they would take. What this meant was that some of what I had initially desired to discuss, such as the evolution of sexuality and understandings of sexual desire, were sometimes (but not always) circumscribed. Discussion of erotic desires is therefore relatively limited compared to my discussions of consumptive, economic, and political desires.

Finally, a note on anonymity. I have endeavored to protect the women with whom I worked and the details of their locations and individual lives. Aarti, Divya, Janaki, and Pooja Rathod are indeed women who live in a certain urban area of Rajasthan; the names I use are not their real names, nor are any of the names of any persons about whom I write real names. The names of individual addresses, streets, neighborhoods, and villages have also been anonymized. In some cases, I have attributed utterings and claims made by my interlocutors in ways that more completely disguise who said them; I make use of composite figures, alter biographical details,

or change particular biographical components of a story or speech that might make people more identifiable. In a small household study like the one conducted for this dissertation, it is sometimes difficult not to root ethnographic elements to particular people and places; nevertheless, the ethical framework in which I orient myself sees ethnography as a space of mutual obligation. The intimacy that exists in this study, and the intimacy of the desires my interlocutors shared with me, necessitate this kind of ethnographic protection.

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One focuses on the specific material conditions of life in Laxmi Gardens, particularly the relationships between sisters-in-law Divya and Aarti Rathod, their daughters Janaki and Pooja, and Janaki's in-laws the Singhs, who lived in a joint-family configuration in the newer cosmopolitan district of Padmini Nagar. I argue that these women's experiences of their gender are co-constituted with their experiences of class and caste, with anxieties around the seclusion of Rajput women, the historical and contemporary status of Rajput women, and individual relationships with male and female relatives mediated both through self-awareness of women as embodiments of Rajput culture and through awareness of the changes that globalization, economic precarity, and reduction in social status have brought to the family. Rather than the private sphere being a site of cultural preservation, family harmony, and individual self-discovery, the private sphere is most often a space of ambiguity, shame, sexual anxiety, and sluggishness. Self-empowerment emerges concurrently through a desire to transcend private space *and* is rooted in the publicization of private identities as mothers, daughters, and wives.

Chapter Two discusses the discursive production of the Hindi-speaking middle-class woman, through analysis of two magazines geared toward Indian women—the Hindi-language magazines *Meri Saheli* and *Vanitha*—and a series of online Hindi-medium videos produced by the women-oriented YouTube channel iDiva. I argue that aspirational life in India is deeply related to experiences of caste, and further suggest that elite culture in urban India can be read as a reimagining of caste. I argue that non-elite women who unsuccessfully attempt to perform eliteness in public spaces, including the Internet, are at risk of punishment through ritual humiliation and through social exclusion and disdain. I argue that this experience of operating "out of time" or "out of sync" with the evolution of elite life in India (Leichty 2002, Derne 2012, Mazzarella 2013, Baviskar and Ray 2015, Mankekar 2015) both excludes middle-class women from public life and produces a uniquely gendered form of feminine middle-class rage. This is especially true of women who are caste elites but who do not function as social elites in urban India; this feeling of both being left behind and not achieving the aspirational lifestyle to which they are assumed to be entitled produces feelings not only of shame and anxiety, but of anger.

Chapter Three focuses on attempts by my interlocutors to mediate feelings of unease articulated in Chapter Two through the deliberate cultivation of *masti* (pleasure) and *mazaa* (enjoyment) by witnessing and approving of political violence. The social and personal enjoyment that women found in speaking and writing publicly about violence, fantasizing about enacting revenge on Muslims and other minorities, and in supporting violence against these groups allow both for the performance of a public activist persona and for the alleviation of feelings of discomfort directly related to experiences of caste and gender. This enjoyment also allows women to produce affective bonds of solidarity and supposed social intimacy. The pleasure found in violent speech and in the support of violent actors reifies caste, religious, and

gender hierarchies already present in contemporary middle-class Indian life, and establishes the middle-class Hindu woman, regardless of the material circumstances of her everyday life, as an active political subject.

Chapter Four takes the form of an "ethnographic interlude" discussing the massively popular 2019 film *Gully Boy,* the story of a Muslim rapper living in Mumbai's Dharavi slum that was a hit amongst young men and women of the Hindu urban middle class. Many young people adopted the film's tagline, *Apna time aayega* (My time will come) as a personal slogan, even as their experiences of everyday life were radically different from that of the film's Muslim and Dalit characters. Analyzing the film itself and the social phenomenon surrounding it, I argue that the adoption of *Gully Boy's* songs and slogans as the rallying cry of middle-class Hindu youth speaks both to the particular concerns of middle-class young people in urban North India and represents the strategies of aesthetic appropriation that have served to help bring otherwise apolitical young people into the fold of Hindu nationalism. *Gully Boy's* lack of focus on the particular experiences of Muslim and Dalit youth, a product of the close relationship between the film industry and the state, and its pivot towards themes expressed in the middle-class rage movement more generally allows middle-class young men and women to find resonance in it, and for young women to integrate themselves into the middle-class rage movement specifically.

In Chapter Five, I argue that the frustration and anxiety that has been discussed in previous chapters sometimes allowed fissures to appear in ways that subverted even the political consciousness of women themselves. This includes the cultivation of intercaste and interfaith relationships (including romantic relationships), critique of oppressive political systems, and open condemnation of interpersonal pressures that pushed women towards unhappiness and despair. In some cases, women, not content to merely imagine these lifeworlds, set out to create

alternatives of their own, at great personal and familial risk. What drives women to seek out these new lifeworlds, and what possibilities does this desire offer to formulating visions of the future alternative to that of the Hindu nationalist *rashtra?* In this final chapter, I offer a few ethnographic vignettes that illustrate this important aspect of my interlocutors' lifeworlds, in the tradition of Ann Grodzins Gold and Gloria Raheja's studies of the intimate spaces of women in northern Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh (1994). As much as women struggled to find a place in a world which alternatively felt confusing, threatening, and violent, their intentional creation of spaces of joy challenged not only their own individual circumstances, but implicitly laid a challenge towards the constricting dynamic of Hindu nationalist politics.

CHAPTER ONE

QUOTIDIAN STRUGGLES: CASTE STATUS, SECLUSION, AND STAGNATION IN A RAJPUT FAMILY

Every morning, Aarti Rathod wakes up at 5:30. While the rest of the house sleeps quietly, she attends the morning *puja* (prayer service) at the local Ganesh temple in the company of her younger sister-in-law *(binani)* and next-door neighbor Divya Rathod. Afterwards, they return to their separate parts of their family home in Jaipur's posh central colony of Laxmi Gardens, where Aarti begins preparing herself and her family for the day. She prepares *aloo sabzi* (potato curry) and *paratha* (flaky flatbread) for her son, twenty-three-year-old Sukhi, to take in his tiffin to the local college where he studies mathematics; he will wake up around seven o' clock and leave by seven-thirty. After finishing his tiffin and sending him off to college, Aarti will take care of the morning's household chores; she'll wipe down the counters in the kitchen, dust in the living room and dining room, strip the couch of its cotton slipcovering to launder, and collect towels, sheets, and clothing for the day's laundry. The laundry is done in an old-fashioned machine that attaches via hose to the house's main water pump; there is an attached dryer but it doesn't get the clothing dry enough, so Aarti hangs it up on the line. The Rathod family *bai* (maid of all work), Gudiya, is responsible for the more arduous and caste-bounded work of mopping the floors, washing utensils, and cleaning the bathrooms. Today Gudiya is on holiday, having gone to her native village in Sawai Madhopur district, so Aarti leaves the pots and pans she used to make Sukhi's tiffin in the kitchen, and the floors will go unmopped, which Aarti grumbles about, given Rajasthan's dusty climate.

By the time the laundry is done, other members of the household will be waking up and will need their breakfast; this includes Aarti's husband Narayan Singh, who leaves for his job as

a manager in a gem polishing factory around eleven o'clock in the morning, along with the various relatives and renters who stay as paying guests in the large home's many unused bedrooms. The Rathods host a variety of Indian and foreign students who come to study in Jaipur's universities and training programs. Most of the unmarried girls and women who live in the house are responsible for their own food and laundry, but the boys need more assistance; Aarti, who feels responsible for the household's unmarried men, helps engineering student Prem, the son of one of her cousin-sisters, fill up his water bottles for the day, and reminds him to be home from college in time for lunch. Kevin, one of the American students, is suffering from a bad stomach, and Aarti takes her time in preparing his breakfast; she prepares plain white toast, without butter, and a glass of hot water mixed with lemon. Aarti herself is a natural fusser, prone to people-pleasing, but she fusses over Kevin and the other American students the most, aware that they suffer from a staggering amount of respiratory and gastrointestinal ailments during the two months they cycle through the Rathod house.

By the time Sukhi, Narayan Singh, Prem, and the various other members of the household have left for work or school, it is nearly time to prepare lunch. While the vegetables sizzle in the pan and lentils whistle in the pressure cooker, Aarti bathes, then reads a magazine (her favorites are the women's magazines *Vanitha* and *Meri Saheli)*, listens to the radio, or chats with Divya, who is also waiting for her own lunch to cook. They gossip about their children—Sukhi's struggles in college, or Divya's daughter Pooja's fussiness about the *rishtas* (potential marriage matches) that arrive daily for her—or about the exploits of various relatives. By this time, Prem has returned from his morning college classes; he and Aarti eat lunch together while Prem reads the newspaper and Aarti watches television. After lunch, it is time for a nap of two or three hours; necessary because it will be almost midnight by the time Aarti has finished her daily

work and she will get only five hours of sleep. She will sleep less if there is a cousin brother or village relative visiting, which means that they will get the bed and she and Narayan Singh will have to sleep on the living-room floor, before getting up the next day to do it all over again.

Across town, Aarti's daughter Janaki begins her day in very much the same way. Janaki is twenty-five and lives in the equally posh colony of Padmini Nagar with her husband Ashok Singh. The Singhs are a typical joint family, and present in the house are Ashok's parents, his older brother Ramesh, Ramesh's wife Chandni, and Ashok and Ramesh's unmarried younger sister Rekha. As the youngest daughter-in-law of the household, and the most recently married, Janaki rises at five or six in the morning every day to prepare Ashok's tiffin, make breakfast for the rest of the household, and supervise the day's domestic activities alongside Chandni, who must also care for her three-year-old daughter. Ashok leaves for his job teaching French at a local university; the university is twenty kilometers outside of Jaipur, and he will not return home until late in the evening. Janaki and Chandni prepare lunch and tea for their mother and father-in-law; their father-in-law is particular about food and will take only *bhindi* (okra) fry and yellow lentils for lunch, and nothing else. Janaki confessed to me later that, in the year and a half after her marriage, she has become sickened by the smell and taste of yellow lentils. While they make lunch and tea, Janaki and Chandni chat together. Chandni, who Janaki calls *Bhabhisa,* a respectful term from an elder brother-in-law's wife, advises her on how to manage their father-in-law Papaji's difficult moods, the expectations that their mother-in-law puts on them about salt in the food, Chandni's concerns about her ailing father and about the pain of missing frequently absent husbands.

In her off minutes, Janaki might listen to the French-language audiotapes she's recently bought—she hopes to pass a graduate-level exam in French soon, so that she can accompany

Ashok on his trips to Bordeaux and Paris—or practice yoga, another post-marriage interest she has cultivated. She'll update her DP (display picture or profile picture) on Instagram and WhatsApp—maybe a picture of her and Ashok on their recent trip to Kerala and Pudicherry, the two of them posing on the beach, her wearing a pair of jeans and a kurta instead of the *Rajputi poshak*—the traditional Rajput women's dress of long skirt, knee-length kurta, and dupatta—that she wears at home. Three or four times a day, she will call her mother in Laxmi Gardens, just checking in. Aarti, putting down her bowl of half-peeled garlic or waking up from her afternoon nap on the couch, will make her way to the landline phone to speak to her daughter. "Hello? Oh, hello, Janaki…nothing much. Getting ready to make dinner…sitting with Rachel. We're watching TV. Yes, I know I never pick up my mobile…I gave it to Sukhi, and he put it through the wash…Papa's very angry. It's my fault."

She will repeat this exact conversation every time Janaki calls.

After she gets off the phone, she and I will watch television; she and I both love the afternoon serials *Kausati Zindagii Kay* ("The troubles of life"), about a middle-class girl who falls in love with a rich boy and struggles to win the approval of his family; *Patiala Babes,* about a divorced mother and her teenaged daughter in the provincial Punjabi town of Patiala (the daughter, a little disrespectful, refers to her mother at all times as "Babes"); and *Jodhaa Akbar,* a historical serial about the Rajput wife of the third Mughal emperor. Jodhaa was a local girl, a princess from the Rajput royal family that ruled from Amer town just south of the Jaipur city limits, and so watching *Jodhaa Akbar* includes a certain amount of civic pride.

"Despite her name she wasn't from Jodhpur. She was a Jaipur *wali*," Aarti tells me every time we watch the serial.

Although *Jodhaa Akbar* theoretically centers on the relationship between Akbar and Jodhaa, like most serials it takes place entirely in a world of women, in which the men over which they squabble and fight are clueless and marginal. In a typical episode of *Jodhaa Akbar,* Ruqqaiya Begum, Akbar's scheming Persian first wife, will conspire to poison or otherwise threaten Jodhaa's life; Jodhaa, through her trust in God and her inherent goodness, always prevails. Ruqqaiya Begum is childless, while Jodhaa is the loving mother of Salim, the future emperor Jahangir; even when Ruqqaiya Begum fakes a pregnancy for attention, Akbar's thoughts are always with the virtuous Jodhaa.

"Poor Jodhaa!" Aarti says, watching as the princess is once again the subject of an attempted poisoning or is arrested on trumped-up charges of espionage; by the end of the episode, however, Jodhaa has recovered or been set free, and we are content that the brave Rajput lady, despite her long suffering at the hands of her in-laws, has won.

As soon as Narayan Singh returns home, the mood of the household changes.

It bustles into action; there is dinner to be made, news to be watched, children to call in and castigate. Aarti performs the evening *puja* in her little kitchen shrine, bearing the images of Lord Shiva, Goddess Parvati in the full spectrum of her manifestations, from the virtuous wife Gauri to the volatile unmarried Durga, Shirdi Sai Baba, and Lord Krishna. Aarti is a great devotee of Shirdi Sai Baba and once visited his shrine at Shirdi in Maharashtra; this is one of the few trips outside of Jaipur that she has taken since her marriage almost thirty years earlier.

Narayan Singh completes his household accounts and prepares for his weekly visit to their ancestral village of Champa Gaon in Tonk district. The Rathods are the *Thakurs,* hereditary landowners, of the area including Champa Gaon and still maintain some rights to the land worked by the villagers there. The village visits are largely spent settling villagers' disputes and

surveying their land holdings, many of which lie fallow next to the crumbling ruins of their ancestral home. Aarti wants an AC unit put in in the kitchen, which gets stiflingly hot in the summers, so Narayan Singh gets up and fiddles with the household's electricity. However, Narayan Singh feels it is too expensive and has compromised with a large fan that blows directly on Aarti as she prepares dinner. Janaki, who has air conditioning in her house in Padmini Nagar, concurs with her father; AC is damaging to the environment, she says, and anyway it dries out the nasal passages.

Narayan Singh hates Aarti's serials and prefers to watch either the Hindi news or YouTube videos on their recently acquired smart TV. Aarti shoots down the news, which she says is boring: "all the time it's either Modi or monsoon, monsoon or Modi! The monsoon did this, Modi did that. Who cares?"

The TV is outfitted with direct links to Amazon Prime video, Netflix India, and YouTube; while the English-language web series proffered on Amazon Prime and Netflix are more to Sukhi's tastes, the elder Rathods prefer videos of Marwari pop music, funny animals, and what Aarti calls "*des-vides"*—videos of places near and far. Narayan Singh maintains a deep interest in learning about how agriculture works in other countries; he types in "Burma village life," "China village life," or "America village life" and marvels at vast rice paddies, soybean fields, heavy John Deere tractors on farms in Ohio.

Their niece Pooja, returning from a day at the law college, wanders in to bother Sukhi. She squabbles with her uncle over the remote, gets control of it, and begins to watch a video about fashion in Italy. "*Badi Mummy,"* she says, calling her aunt out of the kitchen, "look at this. Wouldn't you like to wear something like this?"

Aarti sticks her head out of the kitchen door. "By God, they're looking fabulous!" she says. By this time, Prem has also returned from school and is reading the newspaper. He and Pooja begin to chatter about the latest in political news; unlike Aarti, they have not yet tired of hearing and talking about the prime minister, Narendra Modi. Prem is such a fan of Modi that during the first election, in 2014, he stopped speaking English to show support for the Hindu nationalist cause. He has recently informed the Rathods that he plans on taking *sanyas,* as Modi did in his youth, refusing to marry in order to deepen his commitment to serve the nation.

"But he *did* marry," says Narayan Singh. He delights in working Prem and Pooja into a political frenzy, as a form of familial teasing. "He did. That woman still lives in the village."

"She gets a pension. Her father's a businessman. She's fine."

"Right. She'd rather live in that village on a pension than be the PM's wife. What *bakwas* (nonsense) you are talking."

"I don't want to talk about it," Prem says, closing the paper.

"I'm only telling you what I think. All the time he is talking about *teen talaq, teen talaq, teen talaq.*[6] Didn't he do that to his own wife?" Now Prem and Pooja are in a shouting match with Narayan Singh, Pooja's voice carrying high above the rest, debating the difference between Modi's abandoned wife and the abandoned wives of the *teen talaq* debate. Although Narayan Singh, as the patriarch, ought to be respected, Pooja shrieks and laughs and calls him names, rolling her eyes as what she sees as his stupidity. Amongst the din, Aarti is still quietly making

[6] Referring to the controversial Islamic practice of *teen talaq,* "triple repudiation," in which a man need only utter the Arabic word *talaq,* "divorce," three times to his wife to constitute a legal divorce. Divorce in India is generally considered the remit of personal law, which for Muslims is adjudicated by community-specific religious courts, and thus *teen talaq* was permissible for Muslims until July 2019, when the Supreme Court of India ruled it did not constitute a legal form of divorce. Modi and other BJP politicians have advocated for a universal civil code that would end the practice of personal law, and took on the issue of *teen talaq* as a method of empowering Muslim women.

dinner, less liable to cause a ruckus as her young niece. While she may occasionally raise her voice at her son, nephew, or niece, advising them to *chhup kar* ("shut up"), in matters of politics she usually remains silent.

"I don't know about all this," she says, or: "I'm tired of hearing about it."

She serves dinner to Prem, her husband, and her son, then eats herself and scrubs down the kitchen again. By this time it's about ten o' clock, and she and Narayan Singh will watch more Youtube videos for about an hour, until she yawns and gets up to go to bed. "Got to get up early," she tells me. "*Neend aa gayi.* My sleepiness has arrived!"

Across town, despite getting up as early as her mother, Janaki stays up much later; she scrolls through her Instagram, watches a French film with Ashok, chats to her friends on WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, or watches Youtube videos in bed. The evening hours are when she gets to spend time on herself, or spend time alone with her husband; although it means sleepiness the next day, she seizes on to them. If she's very lucky, Ashok might take her out; this is really thrilling, as she self-describes as an "outgoing girl;" in a restaurant, café, or theatre she gets the private pleasure of time alone with her husband along with the simultaneous pleasure of being able to openly enjoy herself in public. Padmini Nagar is an up-and-coming colony, popular with young professionals and young couples, and allegedly has the most expensive real estate in the city; Gautam Road, the main thoroughfare in the colony, is ringed with brightly lit *vada pav* (potato snack) stands and *paan* (betel nut) shops and juice centers next to slick modern cafes with names like Mummy's Treat and Little Milano selling lattes and shakshuka. A little farther down the road is an INOX cinema hall and rooftop nightclubs advertising "ladies' nights" where women can drink mojitos and Sex on the Beaches at a discount price. Compared to central Jaipur, where Janaki grew up and which still retains something of Jaipur's genteel 18th-century

Rajput character, Padmini Nagar is all flash and light, a dazzling monument to global India. It is to one of these Gautam Marg "joints" that Janaki hopes that Ashok will take her.

None of these Gautam Marg "joints" can compare to the cafes and restaurants that Aarti and Narayan Singh's American "children" will visit following their hours studying Hindi or Jain theology in one of Jaipur's many language and culture schools geared towards foreign students. Those students will head to the area around the Rajasthan Vidhan Sabha building, where Delhi-based brands and boutique shops geared towards wealthy Indians and foreign tourists are clustered. They might head to Blue Tokai Coffee Roasters, the newest outlet of a Delhi-based coffee chain that sells Monsooned Malabar coffee from Kerala at Rs. 150 a thimble-sized cup, or to Anokhi Café, a vegetarian café attached to a textile wholesalers whose website reads KINDLY NOTE: WE DO NOT OFFER INDIAN FOOD.

In these cafes, American graduate students and teenage Swedish backpackers in baggy elephant-print trousers will rub shoulders with elegant local women in refined blockprint cotton *khadi* sarees, accompanied by their husbands who sit and read the *Washington Post* or *Times of London* while waiting for their wives to shop and finish their tea. The American students are directed towards these locales by the directors of their programs, who consider such places hygienically and culturally "safe;" at times of real stress, when they have grown homesick or tired of India's little "quirks," they may begin to spend more and more time at these places, accompanied by fellow *firangis* (foreigners) and local men and women who speak flawless, un-accented English, and who have cultivated global manners during their educations and work abroad.

From her living room in No. 6 Radheshyam Lane, Aarti feels an acute sense of separation from the lives of her "children" and her own life, which is largely confined to the house and to,

specifically, the kitchen and the living room. The American students return from day trips to the Amber Fort and City Palace bearing photographs and questions; sometimes they go on weekend trips to the lake city of Udaipur or to Delhi, coming back hungover and with new bright clothes and jewelry to be given as gifts to American relatives. "*Kahan gaye tum? Kisi ke saath? Kitne din jaoge tum?"* Aarti asks. Where did you go? Who were you with? How many days will you stay? She examines the new clothes brought from Delhi; bright Chanderi silk *dupattas* and readymade *kurtas* from the posh fair-trade store Fabindia, whose genteel salespeople help whites feel at home. "*Kitni sundar,"* ("how beautiful") she says, running her hands over the cloth. "How much did you say you bought it for? One thousand rupees? That's far too much. But…you can afford it, I suppose." Some of the American students bristle under what they read as Aarti's judgment, of their travel plans, their finances, and their choice in clothing. Yet, when Aarti finally flops down next to me on the couch, mopping her forehead with the end of her saree, what I hear is not judgment but jealousy. "Thirty years I've lived in this city, and I've never even seen Hawa Mahal!"

What do Aarti and Janaki's days, in their convergence and divergence, mean? Can the daily ins and outs of life as a wife, a mother, a daughter hold meaning for how women in a rapidly changing society perceive themselves and the world around them? Does it provide space for them to name and create dreams, aspirations, and desires?

This chapter describes the social realities and everyday circumstances of nonworking, non-elite Rajput women like Aarti and her daughter Janaki—women whose lives circulate through a number of different contexts every day, and whose relationships with India and the world at large are complex and highly ambivalent. Despite the differences in the kinds of technology used by Aarti and Janaki, and some of the differences in their interests, what marks

their lives, and the lives of their female friends and relatives living throughout Jaipur and the surrounding area, is the profound sense of boredom, drudgery, and anxiety they feel; indeed, these feelings are the primary emotions they associate with their lives as mothers, wives, in-laws, and daughters in their households. Frustration with gender and caste-based restrictions on their movement, as well as lack of access to places and things they desire and a profound sense of alienation from friends, spouses and female relatives, inform these negative feelings.

Middle-class women in India are constantly bombarded with divergent messages about what it means to be a *modern, Indian,* woman. *Modern* women speak English, have been educated in *foreign,* live in large single-family houses, and have love marriages; they drink alcohol in nightclubs, work in C-suite management in multinational corporations, never listen to Hindi music, go to feminist rallies, and wear tasteful Western or Indian cotton *khadi* clothing. *Indian* women, however, are the backbone of the nation; they wear saree or salwar suits to preserve Indian culture, they limit their families through the use of birth control but never have premarital sex, they are deeply dedicated to family life and caring for their children, and relatives, and their political activity is largely the stuff of social reform i.e. working in a local Swachh Bharat (Clean India) campaign to end littering and open defecation (Daya 2009). Hindi-language films glorify the forward-thinking-but-still-traditional Indian woman (cheekily referred to by the desi website Samosapedia as a TWIMO, or Traditional With Modern Outlook), such as Anushka Sharma's plucky seamstress in the 2018 film *Sui Dhaga: Made in India,* or Diana Penty's reluctant divorcee in the 2012 *Cocktail;* her character wins Saif Ali Khan's hard-drinking playboy character from his equally hard-drinking girlfriend, played by Deepika Padukone. Ambition within reason is rewarded, but bad girls always finish last.

Scholars of gender and culture in India (Ramamurthy 2010, Daya 2009, Atluri 2012, Jeffrey et. al. 2008) have drawn a connection between this dichotomous messaging and the current state of precarity for many Indians, as underemployment, everyday violence, and economic austerity trouble normative definitions of family connections and of roles within households and larger social networks. As these definitions become increasingly tenuous, one sees both a longing to redefine conventional experience and a reification of these experiences as vital to one's sense of national cohesion—to be Indian is to hold fast to household and social networks, even as to be a *modern Indian* is to constantly challenge them. The circumstances of the extended Rathod household, where caste and gender norms were as strictly observed as they were frequently challenged, give some insight into the quotidian realities of these tensions, particularly in the lives of women, in whose bodies the entire Indian nationalist project has come to reside (Chatterjee 1987, Chakrabarty 1992).

I begin this chapter with a general outlining of the social relations existing within the Rathod household—family structure, histories, and relationships that form the social world of Aarti, Janaki, Divya, Pooja, and their woman friends and relatives. I then discuss how these everyday relations produce feelings of both pride in one's caste and gender status and deep feelings of individual vulnerability, lack of familial cohesion, stagnation, and gender oppression. The production of these feelings hold a central tension in the lives of women, particularly young women who level a critique of caste patriarchy drawn from their wider participation in political and public life, that shape their longing for self-actualization.

The Center of A Universe: The House at Radheshyam Lane

The Rathods are a Kshatriya Rajput family who have lived in and around Jaipur for generations. Their ancestral village is in Tonk district immediately south of Jaipur; the Rathods were the hereditary *Thakurs* or headmen of several agricultural villages in the district and Narayan Singh, as the eldest man of the family, is still responsible for village issues such as electrification, water supply, and agricultural disputes. He travels to and from these villages regularly, outside of his regular employment in industrial gem polishing, one of Jaipur's most famous artisan trades. Aarti is also a Kshatriya Rajput, from the border town of Neemuch in Madhya Pradesh. They married in the early 1990s and settled at No. 6 Radheshyam Lane, at a house that had been built by Narayan Singh's great-grandfather in the 1920s, in the central colony of Laxmi Gardens. Their daughter Janaki was born in 1993, and their son Sukhi in 1998. Janaki married Ashok in December of 2017, and moved out of No. 6 to Ashok's family home in Padmini Nagar. As her parents do, Janaki and Ashok supplement their income by renting out portions of their home to foreign tourists, mostly French. Prior to her marriage, Janaki earned a Masters of Computer Applications and worked in programming for a matrimonial website. Sukhi is a student in mathematics at a local university. Janaki and Sukhi were both educated in a local English-medium private school founded by a Jain benevolent society.

Aarti holds a master's degree in sociology and, prior to her marriage, cultivated an interest in fine arts. Though she gave up art following her marriage to Narayan Singh, much of the No. 6 house is decorated in her paintings and mosaics along with *objets d'art* she has collected. She is a small, slightly rotund, large-hearted woman with a smoker's voice and an extremely loud, contagious laugh. Like her daughter, she self-describes as "outgoing," but she is often alone for most of the day until Sukhi gets home from school, and during this time she

spends it mostly watching television, sleeping, and speaking on the phone to her relatives in Madhya Pradesh, who visit often. When I am home she often comes into my room to chat, asking me mostly about my living situation in Delhi and at home in Seattle, about domestic topics like cooking, and about films and television, about which she is extremely knowledgeable. Besides her husband, her closest family relationship is with her sister-in-law (*binani)* Divya, who is also at home most of the day. She also socializes with a committee of about six women who she meets for ladies' lunches, kitty parties, and home functions like teas and baby showers.

Narayan Singh is tall, slim, and balding, with a pronounced moustache and a heavy brow that makes him look perpetually angry, even when he's not. The villagers in Tonk often refer to him just as Thakurji and he does seem the thakur incarnate, giving off an energy not unlike that of Sanjeev Kumar in *Sholay.* Even when he is in a good mood he is an intimidating presence. Compared to his younger brother Dev Pratap, a hard drinker who might best be described as "jolly," Narayan Singh rarely smiles, but when he does his laugh is loud and uproarious, similar to that of his wife and brother. He is not a particularly strict disciplinarian, although he has expressed regret that neither of his children are especially interested in learning "village ways," and Janaki has discussed with me conversations regarding her behavior with boys that lead me to believe he holds fairly typical Rajput views about women's modesty and behavior.

Janaki is tall, slim, and beautiful, bearing a close resemblance to the actress Anushka Sharma (she herself remarked on this to me along with other female members of her family and some of the girls in the PG house). She is the second-oldest of the family's children, after her cousin-brother Veer, but unlike her cousin-sister Pooja or her brother Sukhi, who are the babies of the family, she displays a mature, basically sober kind of countenance. Her one love is dancing, and she actually made it to the regional auditions for Dance India Dance, but did not

follow through after her parents felt that this would take away from her studies. She earned an undergraduate degree in business and had prepared for the Rajasthan Administrative Service (RAS) exams before ultimately gaining a master's degree in Computer Applications. She was working in programming for a matrimonial website before getting engaged to Ashok in July of 2017. Ashok is a French professor at the Jaipur branch of a large and relatively new Indian university; he has studied extensively in Europe and has done some work in Franco-Indian relations. Since marrying Ashok, Janaki no longer works for the matrimonial website but has been able to regain some of her dance training by working with the French tourists who come to stay at the guesthouse she and Ashok have started out of their home. They also run a small organic farm on the property with chickens and goats. In May 2020, Janaki and Ashok became the parents of their son Arjun, who is the first grandchild born in the Rathod family.

Sukhi, the baby of the family, is a sweet, sensitive, and somewhat unambitious young man who, to Aarti and Narayan Singh's consternation, is usually more preoccupied by video games, music, and riding his motorbike than studies or work. The relationship between Aarti and Sukhi is alternately contentious and affectionate; it is not uncommon for them to argue violently earlier in the day and then cuddle together on the couch only a few moments later. Sukhi's lack of interest in women has also been a source of some concern within the household; he has announced his intention not to marry, which troubles his parents as the dowry his future wife will bring into the household is necessary to recoup part of the costs of marrying off his sister.

The other side of the Radheshyam Lane house is occupied by Narayan Singh's younger brother, Dev Pratap, and his immediate family, consisting of his wife Divya and their twenty-two-year-old daughter Pooja, who studies law at the nearby University of Rajasthan. Dev Pratap and Divya have an older son, twenty-seven-year-old Veer, who is married and is employed as an

engineer with Tata in Bangalore. Dev Pratap and Divya initially seem to be an oddly matched couple; Dev Pratap is outgoing, charismatic, and merry, always joking and laughing, a sharp contrast to his serious-minded brother. Divya is shy and deumre, although occasionally prone to bawdy and sexual joking; she is her husband's junior by eleven years. Her daughter Pooja is bookish and sarcastic, a gossiper who talks loudly and frequently, her hands cutting designs through the air as she speaks. In temperament she is much like her gregarious father, although their relationship is strained by conflict over her career plans, her refusal to marry, and her unhappiness regarding his treatment of her mother. Pooja was the person in the family who helped me to understand the complex kinship relations—both those shared by other Rajput families in the region and those that were unique to the Rathods themselves. As we are close in age and temperament, my connection to Pooja and her inner world became very strong, and she was my guide and collaborator in my understanding of how families like the Rathods, and how women like the Rathod women, come to understand themselves in the contemporary moment.

Laxmi Gardens

Laxmi Gardens is a small colony in central Jaipur, between the new built-up developments in Malviya Nagar and Sanganer and the narrow streets of the Old City at Ajmer Road. It was once part of a new and prosperous suburb; while still posh, the houses are slightly older, and the people slightly less flashy, than those of Malviya, C-Scheme, or Lal Kothi. Laxmi Gardens is divided from the larger colony of Jai Singh Enclave by the four-lane Jawaharlal Nehru Marg; while Laxmi Gardens is inhabited mostly by Jain and Hindu Marwari families, Jai Singh Enclave was a site of resettlement for Punjabi Sikhs and Hindus after Partition and it retains a distinctly Punjabi character that is markedly different from conservative Laxmi

Gardens. It is the place to go for nonveg and alcohol in this part of the city. Many people from Laxmi Gardens might go for a night out or for specialty shopping in Jai Singh Enclave (there is also a large shopping mall with a cinema hall, a Reliance Fresh grocery store, and a number of ladies' tailors in the colony) but see themselves as distinct from the residents of Jai Singh Enclave even as they are sometimes lumped together by those from other parts of the city. No Muslim families live in Laxmi Gardens, and indeed residents sometimes express anxiety both about the Punjabis in Jai Singh Enclave and the Muslims of nearby Mirza Ismail Road and their capacity to disrupt their otherwise tranquil colony through acts of drunkenness or communal violence. Young people from Laxmi Gardens, going for a night out in Jai Singh Enclave or to enjoy the shops and restaurants that line Mirza Ismail Road, are frequently warned to return before nightfall or to "look after themselves," as many older Laxmi Garden residents view Jai Singh Enclave and M.I. Road as locations where petty theft is likely to happen.

The house at No. 6 Radheshyam Lane, Laxmi Gardens, bears an air of genteel decay, although various attempts have been made to fix it up over the years. It was built in the late 1920s and bears the signs of various additions for a growing family. When I first came to stay there in Narayan Singh and Aarti's house in the summer of 2015, it had four bedrooms with three bathrooms, a small living room consisting of a large dhurrie, a small color television, some sofas and armchairs, an open-air kitchen that attracted lizards, mice, and the occasional monkey, and in the middle a vast sprawling courtyard that separates the family home of Narayan Singh and that of his younger brother, Dev Pratap. Narayan Singh is an avid hobby gardener and is a master of coaxing lush green grass, various kinds of beans and squash, and tomatoes and chili peppers out of the otherwise harsh Jaipur soil, and his overgrown garden takes over most of the courtyard, along with a large tulsi plant and facilities for doing laundry. Three of the house's bedrooms are

rented out to visiting American researchers and students; when I first lived there, the family slept in one room. The upper floors of the home contain more small bedrooms that are rented out to female students from two nearby colleges; the girls mostly keep to themselves but refer to Narayan Singh and Aarti as "uncle" and "aunty" and move around freely throughout the house's common spaces when need be. The roof of the house is used for drying laundry, and there is also a small sitting area. During power cuts, which are frequent during the unbearably hot summers (the house is one of the few on the street that does not have a generator), the family often sleeps on the roof. When I returned to the house for the second time in the summer of 2017, substantial improvements had been made to Narayan Singh's part of the No. 6 house. The living room had been expanded, new furniture had been purchased, and the lower-floor bedrooms rented out to Americans boasted new bathrooms and new double beds. The staircase to the roof terrace had been improved and the exterior of the house had a new coat of paint. Narayan Singh's hobby garden had been moved to the front yard, and the tulsi plant was now visible when entering the house from the front. Objets d'art, a favorite of Aarti aunty, adorned every surface of the living room, along with religious artifacts.

The most striking addition to the new living room at No. 6 was the purchase of a new "smart" television, which was connected to the Internet and allowed the family to access YouTube videos, Netflix, and Amazon Prime video through the television. While Aarti had previously watched Doordarshan and some Hindi serials throughout the day, she could now watch US channels like the Food Network and the Travel Channel dubbed over into Hindi. Narayan Singh particularly liked YouTube documentaries about Indian national parks, pilgrimage sites, and international locales. We watched videos of New York and Seattle together, as well as touristy locations in Rajasthan like Jaisalmer, Mt. Abu, and Jodhpur. He explained to

me that the new television allowed him to "travel" or "wander" (*ghoomna*) to places he otherwise would have no access to.

The other focal point of the living room is a framed image of Ghanshyam Rathod, a cousin of Narayan Singh's who was a major in the Rashtriya Rifles (a large counterinsurgency unit of the Indian Army) and was killed by militants while on a recon mission in Jammu and Kashmir in 2008. The image is decorated with flower garlands and other Hindu funerary items; an image of Major Ghanshyam also features in the family's puja room. Family members speak of Ghanshyam as a *shaheed* (holy martyr) for the *desh* (homeland) and greatly revere this image. Ghanshyam's widow, Sangeeta, lives in her natal city of Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh as a single mother, with the support of her late husband's extended family conducted primarily through virtual means (i.e. on Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) Family members produce images of Ghanshyam on the anniversary of his death that circulate on family Facebook pages and other forms of social media. These images often make reference to posters of other Indian shaheeds, such as Bhagat Singh.

The Radheshyam Lane house is in many ways a microcosm of middle-class India more generally, with constant tensions between individuals' social, familial, and economic priorities, caste and gender conventions that define social and kinship roles, and the constraints and promises of neoliberal images of the family and the development imaginings of the contemporary Indian state. These tensions, while producing new forms of women's subjectivity, were also often intensely painful, as women struggled to make sense of their own desires in the midst of family obligation, the boundaries that caste draws around gender roles and expression, and the troubling of kinship ties as a result of the neoliberal push for patterns of consumption and the economic pressures of class advancement. Renegotiations of "womanhood" and "manhood"

are common within household forms in liberalizing India; these new subject forms that emerge are subject to both liberation and restriction and anxiety. (Ramamurthy 2009). In the following pages, I discuss a number of ways in which these restrictions and anxieties were produced, both within the household dynamic and within women themselves.

What Can't Girls Do?

The Rathod family is intensely proud of their Rajput caste status, and their connection to the traditional nobility of the former states of Amer and Jaipur, who members of the Rathod family have served as military commanders, generals, and landlords. Members of the family described themselves as "royal," "noble," and "royal class;" as physical evidence of this status, they displayed their family artifacts in every part of the Radheshyam Lane home, which due to its proximity to the seat of royal authority came to stand as its own monument to their nobility. These artifacts were often associated with the Rathods' past as military leaders; swords, guns, and ceremonial knives hung in elaborate displays on the walls of the house, and photographs displayed ancestors dressed in military uniforms gleaming with shining medals. These were symbols of the Rathods' engagement with the masculine authority of Rajput rule in Jaipur, but the family's collective sense of self was not only relegated to the behavior of men.

Part of this inherited memory of caste is the practice of female seclusion, known locally as *ghunghat* and more generally by the Persian term *pardah.* Standards regarding female seclusion are not universal amongst Rajput families and groups, and many Rajput families do not practice seclusion as all. Generally, however, families with strong associations to the princely state and the Rajput royal courts are likely to practice some form of seclusion, as a way to set their families apart as "true Rajputs," as Pooja defined it. For the Rathods and their associates,

seclusion was limited primarily to married women; they did not go out without male accompaniment and covered their faces with their *dupattas* or the end of their *saree* when in the presence of unknown men, elder men, or men of superior status. Unmarried women had more freedom of movement, but were heavily policed by their parents and by their kin relatives.

These forms of seclusion are key to the production of Rajput women's self-identity, and their sense of self in the public sphere. Scholars have argued that the practice of seclusion has essentially de-politicized Rajput women; their absence from the public sphere of politics and culture in Rajputana has relegated them to the status of non-players in the machinations of the contemporary state. Yet seclusion has also provided a form of social advancement for women; *ghunghat,* as with the *burqa,* allows for more freedom of movement in public, and because practices of seclusion are so firmly allied to a Rajput caste identity, women who seclude tie themselves into a regionally powerful politics of caste (Mandelbaum 1988, Harlan 1991, Rathore 2010).[7] Historically, female members of the Rajput nobility were often powerful in their own right; they owned land and collected revenues, participated in the machinations of court politics, and commissioned building projects and works of art. Molly Aiken (2002) suggests that Rajput women have in fact participated in their own self-effacement as a method of accessing political power, preferring to ally themselves with powerful men through the cultural exchange of gifts, including the gift of wives. Rajput noblewomen, who were often identified in documents and portraits only as mothers, wives, or daughters of local rulers, thus solidified their political authority while remaining spatially outside of it. The seclusion and modesty practices that quite literally set them apart from common women and preserved men's exclusive sexual rights to

[7] See Papanek (1982) and Abu-Lughod (2002) on veiling as a form of "portable seclusion" that allows women to maintain politically and social advantageous respectability while participating in public life.

noblewomen's bodies therefore did not prevent noblewomen from exercising their power within the household.

Women in the Rathod household enjoyed their high-caste status and the power they wielded as the wives and daughters of men associated with local nobility. This status was particularly apparent in village relations. Champa Gaon, the primary village of the Rathods' land endowment, has a population of about two thousand, a quarter of which are Scheduled Tribe and a further twenty percent are Scheduled Caste. The Rathods maintained ownership of the vast majority of the village's land through the independence period; Narayan Singh explained to me, looking out over neat fields of mustard and soybean, that this land had been "ours" until the end of "*Angrezon ka time"* ("the Britishers' time"). Divya and Aarti were referred to as *Thakuraniyan sa,* the respected wives of village headmen, and when villagers came to Jaipur for medical appointments, business necessities, or pilgrimages, they called formally on Aarti and Divya, bringing gifts of jewelry, new clothing, and sweets. These gift-giving sessions were also practiced between Divya, Aarti, and female relatives of "inferior" familial status (i.e. not the wives or immediate female relatives of headmen). They were often called to preside over religious events and special *pujas* in the village, their position, along with their husbands', endowing them with particular ritual functions that made them, in the economy of Champa Gaon, set apart from the common population. Even their decaying country *haveli,* which had stood abandoned for many years, and the complex around it was known as the *Rajput Mohalla,* the Rajput neighborhood. Aarti and Divya could be called upon, during these ritual functions and formal house calls, to appeal to their husbands on behalf of villagers, to discuss happenings in the village and give their opinions, and to serve as mediators, as their husbands did, in village and familial disputes. In Champa Gaon, the Rathod women were not separate from the village's

public life and politics, but were instead actively folded into it by the dint of their performance of caste status through dress (wearing the *Rajputi poshak,* or typical dress of Rajput noblewomen), insistence on seclusion, and adherence to formal displays of superiority to other village groups. "We are royal women," Pooja told me, "and we like royal, beautiful things." These "beautiful things" were seen to be the reward of their adherence to strict hierarchies of caste and class—those who adhered to a sense of how a royal woman should be were entitled to all a royal woman should possess.

The strictures of female seclusion nevertheless often chafed heavily on women, especially in circumstances that were outside of the world of Rajput village relations. One evening, Aarti, her elderly mother, and I watched a news program about a young woman who had risen to become a district collector in western Rajasthan, the first in the district's history. The young woman's name was of ambiguous caste, which sparked a discussion about what her caste must be. "Good for her," Aarti said, "but there is no way she's Rajput. No Rajput would let his daughter become a district collector, when the job is so dangerous. For Rajputs, that is a job for men." She said this with a little disdain in her voice, a tone her mother parroted. "No matter what a Rajput girl wants to do," she said, "if she wants to be a district collector or anything else like that, it simply won't be available to her." I found this conversation interesting, since before her marriage Aarti's daughter Janaki had been studying to take the exam for the Rajasthan Administrative Service (RAS), the state civil service. She had married before she had been able to take the exam, and ended up not taking it, since she said her new in-laws were "traditional" and did not approve of women civil service officers. When I mentioned this, Aarti snorted. "Timepass!" she said. "She had nothing else to do, so she studied for the exam." There had not,

apparently, been any question of Janaki, even in her natal family, actually becoming an RAS officer.

Questions of *timepass,* boredom, restriction, and loneliness emerged as I moved with the Rathod women and their friends throughout their days, speaking to them about their experiences and living in the rhythms of their everyday lives. While seclusion offered its social advantages, women also expressed keen awareness of the restrictions that seclusion placed on the development of their sense of self, how it troubled kinship and social relations, and how it produced mental, and physical, anxieties over one's well-being and place in the world. Many contemporary middle-class South Asians have expressed feelings of existing "outside of time" or "outside of modernity" (Fernandes 2006, Derne 2008, Mankekar 2015, Leichty 2002) as a result of the ambiguity and uncertainty of modern life; in the case of the Rathods, the village conventions which regulated behavior in Champa Gaon was less apparent in Jaipur, where these relations were not always part of everyday life. What was part of everyday life were the immediate relations within the household, in which multiple actors, male and female, constantly prevailed upon each other to both transgress and reify gender and class roles. When the realities of seclusion were not attended to by the reward of respect, women began to question their own self-identities and their role in public life more generally. In the following paragraphs, I discuss a number of anxieties over women's role in public life that emerged amid everyday relations amongst the Rathod family and their associates. I conclude by suggesting that women's simultaneous transgression and reification of the caste-bounded realities of gendered experience in Rajput households represents a dynamic and conscious choice-making by women, who use the relative safety and protection of caste and class to mount a place in which to participate in Indian public life more generally.

Doubt in One's Own Reasoning and Education

Many women, when asked to explain their beliefs in a particular system or way of governance, might answer "*Mere ko kuch nahin pata"* ("I don't know anything"). This was a frequent answer of Aarti's when I would sit down to take her interview; she maintained that she did not have particular insight into anything, even when previous discussions indicated that she, in fact, did. She had once claimed "I don't know or understand why anyone does anything," in complete seriousness, not long after she had told me that she held a master's degree in sociology. Both Aarti and Narayan Singh had attended university and held bachelor's degrees; however, Aarti was immensely proud of her graduate school attendance, even as she sometimes claimed to have not learned from it. She once told me, beaming and laughing, that she had turned down a marriage proposal from a wealthy factory owner in Neemuch, a match that had been deeply desired by her parents, "because he was only 10th pass. And I had an MA. What could he ever do for me?" Despite her education, and despite the not-a-little pride she took in it, she would regularly demur when asked questions about her own opinion or about her knowledge, murmuring "I don't know," and giggling slightly, as if it was ridiculous that she had even been asked the question. She had been educated in Hindi-medium schools and universities, and her English proficiency was somewhat limited. English proficiency is a particular source of anxiety for educated Indians in general (see Jeffrey et.al. 2012), and remains a significant barrier to advancement, since full fluency in English increases hourly wages by 34 percent for working men in the country (Timalsina 2021). Yet even for nonworking women, the question of English proficiency was fraught with anxiety, as English proficiency is associated not just with financial security, but social recognition and the ability to move in increasingly more elite social circles.

Pooja, who spoke flawless English but who struggled with English writing, was so afraid of "looking bad" in front of law college colleagues that she wrote texts and emails exclusively in Romanized Hindi, that being preferable to the social faux pas of ungrammatical English. English proficiency of course suggests nothing about one's intelligence level or education, but the Rathod women lamented their "provincial" educations and their limited opportunities to use English as indicative of their failure to properly adapt to modern life.

Aarti's daughter Janaki parroted this line in my first interview with her, when I asked how she planned to vote in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, which would determine if Modi would remain prime minister. Like many people in Rajasthan, she supported Modi's prime ministership and the BJP government, but had crossed over to vote for the Indian National Congress in the recent December 2018 state legislative elections, throwing out the unpopular chief minister Vasundhara Raje in favor of Ashok Gehlot, a longtime Congress politician who had served twice before as CM.

"Why did you vote this way?" I asked her.

She talked openly about the many scandals that had embroiled Raje's tenure as CM, Rajasthan's lack of development, and the poor condition of the farmers. Gehlot's two-time service as CM meant that he would be a stable guide for the state, and anything was better than the highly corrupt state BJP apparatus, which had suffered from multiple national embarrassments during Raje's tenure. Then she paused and said, "But, I don't know. I'm just a simple girl, and I don't really care or know much about politics, and I don't understand much about how it works. I usually vote the way Papaji (her father-in-law) tells me to vote, because he was a sarpanch, and he knows more than me anyway." Her husband Ashok, a Ph.D, entered the room, and she gestured to him, saying, "You should ask him about all of this. He knows far more

about it than I do." Despite her own savvy political knowledge, she could not believe that she was equipped to speak authoritatively on politics.

Some women, particularly young women, believed that their mother's social stagnation was rooted in a "lack of output," or opportunities to use their educations for a productive purpose. Ananya, who I had met at a local cultural program at Jaipur's Jawahar Kala Kendra arts complex, worked at a local design firm and had grown up in a progressive family in Jodhpur; her father was a high-ranking IPS officer. Ananya related to me the story of her father's older sister *(bua)* who had married into a joint family in Jhunjhunu and who worked, intermittently, as a bookkeeper for a local accounting firm. Her *bua,* like Ananya's father and husband, had been educated in Rajasthan University and had enjoyed a long career before marriage. Yet within the confines of her household, Ananya had explained, her *bua* had "withered;" without intellectual output, she had, in Ananya's words, become a "gossip," relegated to fighting with her sisters-in-law and watching soap operas about fighting sisters-in-law. Many other women I knew told similar stories about educated female relatives who had seemed to struggle with maintaining intellectual selfhood after marriage, and found themselves unable to connect with the other women in their households. Ananya's words reflect a long tradition of elite speculation over the impact of the joint household on women's intellectual capacities; I was surprised to read, in an account of the 19th-century British traveler Isabella Bird Bishop on the conditions of the Rajput *zenanas,* echoes of Ananya's account of her *bua's* life:

> *I…can speak from experience of what the lives of secluded women can be—the intellect so dwarfed that a woman of twenty or thirty is more like a child, while all the worst passions of human nature are developed and stimulated; jealousy, envy, murderous hate, intrigue running to such an extent that in some countries I have not been in a women's house without being asked for drugs to disfigure that favorite wife or take away her son's life. This request has been made of me nearly one-hundred times. This is a natural product of a system that we ought to have subverted long ago* (Rathore 2010).

Janaki also insisted to me that such lack of intellect and violence was commonplace, but only in the villages, where women "were not educated." The invocation of such colonial language to explain women's condition is part of a long characterization of the Indian household as unclean, uncooperative, and unharmonious, particularly for women (see Chakrabarty 1992, Chatterjee 1988). The Rathod women, educated in this kind of colonial language about the presence of women in joint households, thus frequently invoked the presupposition that women in joint families and secluded women were "not educated" both as a kind of self-effacement and expression of unhappiness and as a way to set themselves apart from other women like them, who were presumed to "suffer" more deeply because of their social status.

Fear of Transgression

To transgress the limitations of one's day was to risk serious social, and sometimes physical, danger. To be seen flirting with a boy or getting on the back of his scooty, let alone texting with them at night, meeting them secretly, or engaging in sexual or romantic activity, was to risk the wrath of one's relatives, particularly one's father, about whom it was often said *Papa laathi haath mein leke mere ko maar dalega* ("Papa will kill me with a stick"). Girls and young women were acutely aware that the affable, joking men I met in homes and in shops on a daily basis had the potential to become violent, even if they had never before shown this level of violence to their wives or children. Such fears permeated the everyday experiences of women and girls, particularly unmarried daughters, for whom propriety, particularly caste and sexual propriety, was a matter not only of social standing, but of actual physical safety.

Rumors of girls—girls from the adjoining neighborhood, girls from older or younger batches, or from the other side of Jaipur—who had "done something wrong" by texting with

boys, putting up indecent photos on WhatsApp or Instagram, or allowing herself to be caught up in an "MMS" or nude photo scandal were frequently invoked by girls and young women as a potential consequence for going outside of the boundaries of one's everyday social life. To communicate secretly with a man was to risk the danger of being exposed not only to one's family but also to one's friends; these friends, averse to the risk of being associated with a "notorious woman," would soon leave their unfortunate companion behind.

In the Rathod family, these phone and internet scandals were related by one another with much aplomb, and were often accompanied by an analysis of what the girl had done exactly to merit this scandal. Relatives and those who had close relationships with the family were not spared from this relentless analysis and judgment. I once told Aarti, in a moment of deep upset and vulnerability, about a sexual assault I had experienced as a student at the hands of the son of family friend. I had recently seen a photo of this boy in passing on Facebook, which had brought up old and uncomfortable feelings. I described the situation with some delicacy to Aarti—that I had chosen to walk with a boy who was well-known to my family and was *bhai ki tarah* ("like a brother"); I had said that the young man had attempted to hurt me without describing the level of violence. I then explained that I was deeply distressed at seeing a picture of him, and dearly missed the support network of my own family and friends back home. Aarti had always treated me with deep concern for my wellbeing, and in that moment I had sought her out for something approaching maternal comfort. After all, this was a woman who had known me for several years, who had shared her life with me as I shared it with her, knew all my struggles as a fieldworker, and who often tenderly would hold my hand or stroke my hair as a mother does a child. I longed to be understood.

Aarti considered this for a moment, watching me sniffling on the couch, and then answered in a firm, unwavering voice: "*Lekin kaisa ho gaya? Tujhne us ladke ke saath kya kiya?"* ("But what caused it? What did you do with that boy?") She got up and turned away from me in silence, clearing away our tea tray and tea glasses, and we never spoke about it again. Despite my obvious distress, and Aarti's knowledge of my character, Aarti's concern was what clear boundaries I had broken in order for the attempted assault to have occurred.

Neither were the members of one's own family spared from this perception that deserved danger was the natural result of transgressing boundaries. A particular event was related to me by an American acquaintance who knew the Rathods and had been privy to a number of conversations about members of the extended family while visiting Divya's natal household in Udaipur. A cousin-sister on this side of the family had created a secret Instagram account that she used to follow younger members of the family and boys from school. The cousin-sister had received a message from an account claiming to be Janaki's husband Ashok, who presented himself as a "safe" cousin-brother, a man who could be spoken to online without familial supervision. The cousin-sister began to talk to him more and more, and eventually "Ashok" asked her to send sexually explicit pictures of herself. Distressed, the cousin-sister told a young male relative, who confronted "Ashok;" at this point, it became clear that this was not, in fact, Janaki's husband Ashok who owned the account, but an unknown stranger, perhaps a male admirer from the neighborhood or the boy she knew from school. The young male relative's actions in confronting "Ashok" led to the revelation of this texting relationship to the cousin sister's family in Udaipur; the acquaintance did not know exactly what the end result was, but had heard that the girl was "thrashed." She then repeated what the female relative who had told her this story said: "She said, 'If I ever did that, my father would beat me to death with a stick.'"

Only once did I witness such a rumor being created in real time. Vikas, the Marwari Jain boyfriend of one of my American acquaintances, showed up to a scheduled group dinner intensely agitated, regularly leaving the table to check his phone and engage in heated conversations on the other end of the line. When he returned to the table we asked him what had occurred, and he explained: Bulbul, the nineteen-year-old daughter of his family's houseman, had left the house unseen, getting up from where she slept on the floor next to Vikas' elderly grandmother, getting into a car driven by an unknown person, and taking off. She had left a note for her father letting him know that she had gone on to better things, and that he should not bother looking for her. Naturally her parents, along with Vikas' family, were deeply distressed at what Bulbul had done. No one knew the name or identity of her male companion, and Bulbul's parents were worried she might have met up with a sex trafficker who would take her to Delhi or Mumbai and into a life of forced sex work. The *Times of India* regularly printed stories about idealistic young Rajasthani women forced into the sex trade; this was alleged to happen so much in Rajasthan that in 2017 the Rajasthan Police Service launched MILAAP, a special task force, designed to reunite trafficked women and children with their families.

My feelings about Vikas were somewhat mixed; he was a lawyer admitted to the bar in the Rajasthan High Court and had met my friend on Tinder, still an app with some degree of sexual licentiousness in Jaipur. He self-described as "post-Jain," ate meat, smoked, and drank alcohol, and regularly dismissed the worlds of Rajput and Marwari Jain societies for being "backwards" and overly concerned with propriety and cultural homogeneity. He referred to my American friend as a "timepass girlfriend," sometimes within her hearing; he made a great deal, in front of the Americans who made up his girlfriend's friends in Jaipur, of proving that he did not fit the typical figure of the conservative, financially solvent, vegetarian, sexually sober

Marwari Jain man. Yet he was deeply distressed not at the danger that Bulbul had gotten into by jumping into a car with a stranger, but at the shame a disappearing maid would bring to her family and his. “She slept with my grandmother every night,” he said, burying his head in his hands. “Now who will care for my grandmother? Who will want to be with her? Her parents will never be able to find any situation for her.” This drama continued throughout the night, with repeated phone calls taking place at the table between Vikas, his parents, his siblings, and Bulbul’s parents, who were apoplectic with worry. I found Vikas’ concern not for Bulbul herself, but for his grandmother and the status of his own family, to reflect what I was seeing all around me; in a precarious sexual system, the status of women’s purity is paramount importance. It was unsurprising to me that a self-styled “liberal” and “progressive” like Vikas might also invoke the language of purity, respect, and trust in his concern over Bulbul’s sexual transgression, since the reification of gender norms tends to go hand-in-hand with transgression, even amongst men who otherwise claim to support women’s empowerment (Daya 2009, Bhowmick 2013, Atluri 2013). Of course, Vikas did not suffer from the same kind of precarity scholars see as the place from which contemporary “angry young men” seek to police women’s sexuality. Nevertheless, these stories indicate the ubiquity of this fear, and the imminence of the danger that can face women who transgress it.

Poor Physical Health as a Sign of Inner Turmoil

About three months into my stay in the Rathod house, the migraines that had afflicted me since puberty suddenly became more frequent and severe; the doctor I consulted chalked this up to pollution and adjustment to a new environment. I began to spend more and more time in my room asleep in the dark, rather than being the adventurous and outgoing junior fieldworker I had

tried to be up to that point. I worried that I was coming across as rude to Aarti and Narayan Singh; nevertheless, one afternoon as I lay on my bed with a towel over my eyes, Aarti entered with an Ayurvedic tincture and explained that she too had suffered from migraines since she was a young woman. *"Bahut hi dard ho gaya,"* she explained to me—it was really painful. *"Sir mein, aankhon mein, whole body mein dard ho gaya"*—it hurts in the head, the eyes, the whole body. She patted my forehead and gave me her frequent admonishment: "*Araam kar lo. Rest lo."* Relax, why don't you?

Aarti's health was a frequent subject of distress in the house. As a young woman, she had suffered from migraines, low blood pressure, and regular blackouts, and her niece Pooja later claimed to me that Aarti spent the first few years of her marriage mostly asleep. Though she had gained more fortitude after the birth of her children, she still suffered from kidney problems that necessitated surgery, as well as other metabolic ailments related to her heart and lungs. Not long after I had discussed her migraines with her, she had a physical where her blood pressure had been measured at 160/100, a shockingly high number that distressed her greatly. She had come home with a newly-purchased wrist cuff to measure her pressure at home and begged Narayan Singh to do the readings for her several times a day.

"Don't know why it's so high," he told her. "I feel fine these days." Narayan Singh had himself suffered from "BP" for years, and Aarti had been instructed by his doctor to prepare food with low salt content; at dinner Narayan Singh would make a scene of looking for the salt shaker, asking Aarti *"Namak kahan gaya?"* Where'd the salt go? He might have complained, but under Aarti's ministration his blood pressure returned to a normal level. Aarti's "BP" proved more difficult to manage. Although Narayan Singh measured it several times a day, it was all over the

place; sometimes it was near the "normal" 120/80, while other times it would spike again to 160/100.

Aarti was not the only woman I knew to suffer from health problems that seemed to come and go and be lifelong. Women frequently complained of migraines, gastrointestinal distress, inexplicable fevers, and general nervous disorders that were sometimes referred to as "hemoglobin" or "tired illness." Once, when Janaki was staying at her parents' house while Ashok was in France, she was shown a video of Ashok with a group of young French people, doing a skit in French for a course he was supervising; in the video, Ashok appeared to be flirting with a young, blonde French woman, as they danced together to the Bollywood song *O ladki aankh marey* ("O girl, your eyes wink at me"). After this, Janaki was struck by a period of high fever and severe vomiting, which would come and go and which the doctors could not attribute to a parasite. Sleep seemed to help, but only somewhat, and Janaki became an insomniac, sitting in the living room scrolling Facebook at all hours. Only Ashok's premature return from France helped the symptoms to subside, and she became pregnant not long after.

Another symptom that women suffered from was extreme tiredness. This extreme tiredness had no association with the summer heat; it was year-long and stretched from the period after breakfast through lunch to the early evening hours. Walking through residential neighborhoods in central Jaipur, it was not uncommon to see elderly women asleep on chairs in the front porches and courtyards of their homes, sitting like silent bodyguards in front of their dark, quiet houses. In the rooms that the Rathods rented out as part of a PG house, the girls and young women who lived there wore pajamas all day, as they were inclined to catch quick naps when they were at home and not at school. Sleep seemed to be a particularly feminine way of escaping regular boredom; men slept, but never to such an extent, and did not seem to suffer

from the sluggishness that their wives and daughters suffered. Many women attributed this constant sleepiness to boredom, or a sense that their lives were "same to same": stuck with an unending procession of hours laid out before them, and very little to do, sleep often seemed the most attractive option. My friend Gauri, a twenty-six-year-old unmarried woman, described to me how her decision to open a posh coffee shop with her friend's brother had emerged partially out of her desire to mitigate her sleeping all the time; she found herself sleeping fourteen hours at a stretch at home, struck by severe fatigue that sleep itself seemed unable to cure. In the Rathod household, I witnessed how the nonworking hours of Aarti's day were taken up most frequently by sleep; between breakfast and lunch, after lunch, and at night, she would fall asleep on the divan in the living room or in bed. Coming home in the afternoons, I would know which door to enter—the front door, which required me to ring a bell, or the back door which I could unlock on my own but which required some maneuvering—by whether or not I could see the curtains in front of Aarti's bedroom doorway fluttering from the cooler running as she slept.

I began to find myself drawn into this gendered world of sleep. The rhythms of the house were such that I did most of my data collection in the mornings and then again in the evenings just before and during dinner; this left long hours where I had very few people to talk to and not much to do. Though I maintained good sleeping habits at night, I became a frequent taker of naps, something I had never done before; finding myself spending another day at home with nothing to do, I would pull my quilt over myself and drift off into a mid-afternoon sleep. More often than not, when I awoke from this nap Aarti herself would be asleep, having tiptoed in to leave a cup of tea for me on my nightstand. My body ached when I awoke in the morning; if I had a bad research day, or hadn't been able to get as much work done as I wanted, I would lie

down on the couch in the living room and fall asleep. “You and I are the same,” Aarti would chuckle. “Big sleepers.”

Eventually, these naps would become concomitant with feelings of panic. If I wasn’t sleeping, I would have feelings of intense dread and fear which kept me up at night. Like Janaki with her Facebook scrolling, I would pace the hallways of the house at night, sometimes climbing up to the roof of the house, wrapped in a quilt, to look out silently over the sleeping city. My blood pressure, like Aarti’s, would spike and fall, so much so I was worried I might be seriously ill. At one point, I developed chills and a fever which I worried was dengue; it wasn’t, but simply an inexplicable fever like those I saw the Rathod women suffer with frequently. It wasn’t until I returned from India that I received a diagnosis of anxiety and depression, although the doctors could offer me no explanation for the fever. None of the Rathod women named these somatoform illnesses as anxiety or depression, although Gauri, discussing her own struggles, told me, “Did you know that eighty percent of Indian housewives have some kind of depression?” an unconfirmable statistic that I heard repeated by other elite friends in Delhi and Jaipur.

Let Us Now Praise Silent Men: The Death of Female Intimacy

Despite the difficulties and compulsions of life in seclusion, women find time for social interactions with female friends and relatives. Almost every day, Aarti entertained her sister-in-law Divya, who lived next door, in the lazy hours between breakfast and lunch; the two of them would watch television together, listen to the radio, or gossip about relatives—who was doing business where and who had most recently scandalized the older people of the family. Occasionally, they would be joined by a female cousin or in-law from other parts of Jaipur and the surrounding area. These were women who I knew only by their *ghar naam,* their household

nicknames, women with names like Pinky and Sweety and Jiju. They wore brightly-colored, intricately decorated *poshak,* the traditional Rajput women's dress consisting of an ankle-length skirt, knee-length blouse or *kurta,* and an *odhni,* a long, diaphanous dupatta-style veil drawn across the bosom and hair and tucked into the waistband of the skirt. These were visiting occasions, but also formal occasions to codify caste and clan relationships. If the visiting woman was a young sister-in-law or cousin, or had married into the family, she would initially draw her *odhni* down over her face, bowing low and gesticulating to Aarti as the eldest daughter-in-law of the household as a sign of respect.[8] They often brought gifts of saree fabric, bangles, or readymade *poshak,* in turn, Aarti would give them a suit or *poshak* set taken from her *almira,* out of a collection of garments she kept aside specifically for this purpose.

The women would have tea, namkeen or sweets, and chat for maybe forty-five minutes or an hour. These were loud, raucous hours, in which women would engage in gossip, physical joking (pushing, pinching, hitting) and sexual innuendo, showing pictures of young men they were thinking about for their daughters to each other and commenting on their complexion, bodies, clothing, jobs, and family situations. It reminded one less of a middle-aged ladies' lunch and more of an adolescent sleepover, in which joking and taboo topics were the order of the day. They would bow to Aarti again before leaving, and Aarti would shuffle their gifts into her *almirah* to eventually be given again to another, different, female relative.[9] Without much

[8] Aarti and Divya would both perform this action in front of their husband's sisters, despite in some cases being older than them. I never saw Divya perform this in her interactions with Aarti, perhaps reflecting the long intimate relationship between the two of them; however, she either covered her face or left the room completely in the presence of Narayan Singh.

[9] My gifts to Aarti were also treated to this *almirawala* shuffle. On the occasion of her birthday I gifted her with a red silk dupatta after she had mentioned to me that it was her favorite color; I later saw her niece Pooja wearing it on Holika Daman, the Holi eve bonfire. Borrowing and "re-gifting" of jewelry or articles of clothing between female relatives was extremely common. In some cases, cosmetics and jewelry I gave to women with the intention of having it returned were instead kept and given to another woman, with the understanding that this had been my initial purpose all along.

discussion, life would return to normal—Aarti would return to her kitchen while Divya would walk across the courtyard to hers. When I visited other Rajput households in Jaipur and in Delhi, I would witness the remnants of much the same kinds of interactions; sarees and sweets brought as gifts from visiting female relatives, offered to new guests in turn or packed away in an almirah to be brought out later on.

Caroline Osella, in her studies of love and sexuality in Keralite Muslim matrilineal families (2012) has suggested that the space of familial female intimacy—such as ladies' parties, all-female gatherings and trips such as those engaged in by Aarti, Divya, and her relatives—represent an ambivalent space in conceptions of marriages and households that are strongly influenced by neoliberal disciplines designed to encourage the "Western-style" nuclear familiar and the heterosexual companionate marriage. While life in a joint family (or matrilineal clan unit, in the case of Osella's respondents) is marked by social conflict and drudgery (14), it is equally marked by intense and loving intimacy between women in a joint household and, when men are traveling or working, a respite from the sexual and domestic toil that men demand (15). Osella's respondents were keenly aware that they as Keralite women were lucky to avoid the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law drama that they felt marked North Indian intimate relationships, as seen on cable television and in dubbed Hindi-language serials.

Like Osella's Keralite women, women in Jaipur often identified their relationships with the women in their household as their closest and most intimate. Women in Jaipur occasionally shared moments of intimacy that transgressed the boundaries of strict joint-family and Rajput caste boundaries. In one home, I was shown a video of a daughter's recent wedding, where I knew several of the guests but which I had been unable to attend. The video was of the elaborate *mahila sangeet* (ladies' music gathering) held a couple of days before the wedding, in which

women of the bride and groom's family, along with female relatives and high-level guests, are invited to dance and sing in celebration of the bride. These *mahila sangeet,* in contrast to the Hindi cinema-style grandiose *sangeet* nights held in other parts of the country, are generally sedate affairs, in which women dance solo with their hair and faces covered to slow-tempoed *mehndi* and *bidaai* songs. In this *mahila sangeet,* however, the caterers had arrived late, meaning that there was no food or drinks until late in the evening. Desiring to placate mutinous guests, the mother of the bride had asked for whisky to be brought from the men's gathering outside on the marriage lawn into the party; the whisky was then served to guests in small plastic cups. The mother of the bride pointed out to me how some of the ladies had become red in the face and were swaying as they walked and danced. *"Sab mahilaen nasha ho gayi! (All the ladies got wasted!)"* she told me, laughing and hiding her face in her hands. The dancing on the video slowly became more erratic as the women all became more and more intoxicated, but, it was clear, this was matched by their enjoyment of the *sangeet.* The joyousness on the faces of the sangeet attendees was sharply contrasted by the following scene of the wedding video, documenting the pre-wedding dinner, in which, in the presence of men, the women's open expressiveness of pleasure and joy was sharply diminished.

This intimacy was often troubled by concerns over finances or economic support. From talking to Pooja, Divya's daughter, I came to have some understanding of the relationship between Aarti and Divya. Divya was raised in a Sisodia Rajput family in the genteel lakeside city of Udaipur on the border with Gujarat. Both of their fathers had distinguished civil service jobs; Aarti's father was a police superintendent while Divya's father worked for the Rajasthan Administrative Service. They were married in the early 1990s around the same time; I was informed by a girl living in the household that their marriages had originally been arranged with

different brothers—Aarti was intended to marry the jolly, outgoing Dev Pratap while Divya was supposed to marry the shy, serious Narayan Singh. Narayan Singh's romantic interest in Aarti switched the spouses, and thus Aarti became the *jethani,* the respected elder sister-in-law. As a young woman, Aarti was artistic and bookish, while Divya was popular and athletic, a Rajasthan state champion in women's basketball. When they married into the Rathod family, Narayan Singh and Dev Pratap's parents were running the house at No. 6 as a guesthouse for foreign tourists; Aarti and Divya, as the youngest daughters-in-law of the household, were expected to clean and cook for the guests, with the expectation that they would do the dirty and diminishing work of cleaning guest rooms and toilets, tasks that repulsed them as Rajput women. At the time, Narayan Singh was unemployed but intermittently did contract work in Delhi, meaning that he was not often around, and Aarti developed a relationship with her sisters-in-law that was not mediated by the demands of a husband and his time. Divya, however, with her husband at home, was ground down by his demands and the demands of her marital household. This competition between husbands and sisters-in-law altered the relationship of two women of roughly the same age (in their early twenties) and from roughly similar family backgrounds. Pooja explained the history of their complex relationship thus:

Badi Mummy (Aarti) is the daughter of a Superintendent of Police, and my mother's father had a government job, in the Centre, you know, but still a good job. And when my mother came to live in her in-law's house when she was first married, they had just started to run the guesthouse, so there was the whole family there and also the foreigners. Badi Mummy and my mother were supposed to take care of everything, because they were the bahus, but Badi Mummy was always saying 'I have a headache. My hemoglobin is low.' She wasn't having any energy at that time, so my mother was doing everything herself. She was making chapatis and everything. She was doing all the cleaning. Badi Mummy didn't want to do it. She'd say 'I won't make chapatis for the foreigners. I won't clean any bathrooms.' Now she is doing it all! But in her younger years she flat refused, saying her health is so bad. And my mother, she is much quieter. That's her personality. She doesn't fuss, she just starts crying. About this she tried to make a fuss, and my father's sisters all stood up for Badi Mummy, saying "Why should she have to do this work? She is an SP's daughter."

Clearly, Aarti was able to leverage her slightly higher social status, and her greater personal fortitude, into finding favor with her husband's sisters and therefore avoiding the difficult and degrading work expected from a young daughter-in-law. Other women from joint households related to me similar stories about longstanding animosity between their mothers and aunts, of annoyances that had turned into grudges and been held for years, often having their root in arguments whose subjects of discussion had long been forgotten. At the same time, however, these kinds of events, such as the animosity between Janaki and Chandni following the death of Chandni's father and the early bad blood between Aarti and Divya, demonstrate how the demands of labor and time expected by households on young married women serve to increase alienation between young women living in a single household.

Men were ambivalent, usually superfluous figures in these kinds of relationship dynamics, but it did not mean that their presence was not felt. Male relatives were of special importance in shaping everyday relations within the household. In some cases, biological brothers and cousin brothers could be relied on to protect the intimate secrets of women, and to serve as counselors and guides in matters of dealing with difficult parents and in matters of the heart. Nearly every woman I knew in Jaipur had a beloved brother or cousin, usually always referred to solely as a *bhai* (brother) who provided intimate support and counsel. These "brothers" were always relatives (though not always blood brothers) and were usually close in age to the girls and women; they had often grown up together within the confines of the joint family and enjoyed a sibling-like intimacy. These brothers were often closer to their girls of their household than the girls were with each other. Girls and women often expressed that they feared that their sisters, female cousins, or sisters-in-law would judge them for perceived transgressions (like talking to unrelated boys or being anxious or ambivalent about future marriages and their

relationships with their parents) and sometimes entrusted these boys with tools that allowed them to conduct illicit relationships, like surreptitiously purchased smartphones.

One could laugh, joke, and "do timepass" with these boys in ways that one could not (or at least, in ways that one was not supposed to) with school classmates or even unmarried boys from the neighborhood. Older women saw their *bhais* as protectors and entertainers; relationships were less intimate that than those between younger male and female relatives, but were still marked by deep affection, particularly those relationships between older female relatives and younger male relatives. This is reflected in larger Rajput culture, which places a special importance on the relationship between the *bhabhi* (older sister-in-law) and *devar* (younger brother-in-law) in folk songs like "Nakhralo Devariyo" ("Cheeky Brother-in-Law") and "Pyara Lago Bhabhi Ne Devar" ("The Older Sister-in-Law Loves the Younger Brother-in-Law"). The lyrics of these songs do not suggest any kind of illicit relationship between the sister-in-law and the brother-in-law, but instead a relationship built on emotional intimacy and respect (similar to a brother-and-sister relationship, or in some cases a mother-and-child relationship) that the *bhabhi* achieves neither with a female relative or with her own husband.

Unlike blood brothers, cousins, and younger brothers-in-law, husbands and older male relatives, like fathers-in-law, were often a source of consternation, anxiety, and sadness. An acquaintance of mine once related, in the course of a regular conversation about our days, how her father-in-law had struck her around the face and head for lying down with a migraine. At the time, she was eight months pregnant; when the child, a girl, was born, the same father-in-law threatened to throw her out of the house. Another cousin-brother, who was a beloved figure amongst his female cousins of the same age, was well-known for regularly beating his wife and throwing her out of the house whenever he was displeased with her. These were extreme

versions of how husbands ran their households; I rarely heard stories about overt beatings or physical abuse committed by husbands or fathers-in-law. Far more common were forms of financial and emotional abuse; in some cases, excessive demands for dowry that continued after marriage, and in other cases extended joking and teasing about the nature of wives and women that took on personal Sometimes, Dev Pratap would attempt to draw me into his teasing of Divya by asking me "Isn't she fat? Isn't she looking fat these days?" At first, this seemed no different than the marital teasing that I sometimes saw go on between Aarti and Narayan Singh. At mealtimes, Narayan Singh might exaggeratedly ask for more salt or a piece of lime or green chili before turning to me and sighing dramatically, saying, "Isn't the cook lazy?" Aarti would come out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her flowery lehenga with equal drama, saying, "Thirty years you got free service from me. No more! Let me to go America and open up a restaurant, and let Rachel run it. Then you'll be sorry."

This kind of joking and teasing sometimes devolved into physical violence and molestation, particularly between older men, considered "uncles" and therefore sexually nonthreatening, and young women. I attended a raucous Holi party in the colony, which had been sold to me as a safer alternative to celebrating Holi at the large municipal festival in the Old City. The men who would attend this party, I was told, were well-known older friends and distant relatives, all of whom I could trust to respect my modesty and not molest or harass me. The young men of the colony already regarded me as a *didi* (older sister) and foreign, besides; thus I would not have to worry about them either. I was warned not to walk out of the colony gates during the festival, as I would surely be beset upon by multiple young men under the influence of alcohol and *bhang* (cannabis) who could not be trusted to keep their hands to themselves.

What ensued was a party in which the young men of the colony acted mostly as expected (with mediated glee, throwing color and shooting water in my direction and the direction of other young women with a spirit of fun but without malice) but where the older men acted with particular violence towards young women, especially after everyone had taken part in *bhang* edibles. I witnessed several older men, ranging in age from their late thirties to their mid-fifties, assault and throw young female neighbors and relatives to the ground in an attempt to drench them in Holi colors. One young woman announced that she wanted to maintain a certain balance of colors on her face so that she could take a photo for Instagram; no sooner had she said this than two or three men descended on her, rubbing her face with black oil paint and silver grease so that her face was nearly unrecognizable, and rather than the careful arrangement of purples and greens that she had intended, she was left with a muddy mess. I too was not immune from these kinds of physical assaults; prior to beginning the festivities, I had asked about the use of *pakka rang* or "true color," a strong industrial dye powder that lasted on the skin far longer than normal Holi colors. The other girls and I had agreed that, since my skin was comparatively fairer than that of the average Indian, I should avoid getting *pakka rang* on my face since I ran the risk of being purple for days. One of the same men that had attacked this young woman wrestled me into a headlock and smeared *pakka rang* across my face, into my eyes, and forced his fingers into my mouth and ears, to the uproarious laughter of the other uncles. "She is so fat, but she couldn't fight you off!" one of them cackled. My weight served as justification for further physical assaults; I was dragged into the street, in one game, to serve as a human shield for a group of men in a playfight between two sides of Radheshyam Lane; the Pulwama attacks and the return of the captured Indian pilot Abhinandan had happened just a month before, and the playfight took on a communal edge as the men cried out *Hindustan zindabad! Pakistan murdabad! How's*

the josh? Physical assaults on women were therefore folded into a larger discourse of nationalist masculinity; to attack and abuse women was a symbol of the men's own masculine health.

Given the ambiguity of men's presence in the household—as companions, confidantes, lovers, dictators, abusers, and lifelines—women had ambiguous attitudes themselves towards sexuality, marriage, and intimacy with men. I turn to this fear in the last section of this chapter in order explain how this ambiguity guides women into tentative transgression and reification of their own social roles as a precondition of entry into public life.

"That Janaki Life Is So Dramatic, *Yaar*": Fear of Intimacy, Marriage, and Sexuality

Many young unmarried women I spoke with said that, while they desired to get married, they felt deeply ambivalent about the potential futures available for their married lives. Having seen the disrespect, anxiety, and terror that pervaded their parents' marriages, they approached their potential upcoming marriages with anxiety about the potential for disrespect, verbal and physical abuse, and sexual violence. Although they did not report physical or sexual violence happening within their parents' own marriages, they often reported emotional and verbal abuse, and were aware of the potential for violence within marriages, having heard stories of violent husbands circulated throughout the neighborhood and on television talk shows like Aamir Khan's politically-minded show *Satyamev Jayate.*

Pooja, reflecting on her parents' long marriage, told me the following:

> *There are eleven years between my mother and my father. My mother was twenty-one when she got married. And my father never listens to her. She tells him to do something and he'll do the opposite! They don't have much understanding of each other. Maybe it is because of their age—but they should be able to talk. He should take decisions from her sometimes.*

She then turned her attention to the marriage of her cousin Janaki, who at that point had been married to her husband Ashok for a little over a year.

> *I worry sometimes about marriage, because that Janaki life is so dramatic, yaar. Every morning she has to get up early, pack her husband's tiffin, make the tea and all. And I can't even make chapatis! That Janaki life is not for me. When I think about it, I get so scared, and I think, maybe I would like to run away from this house. But where would I go? It's for that that I'm doing this LL.M* [graduate law degree]. *Mummy and Papa keep saying "Next year we'll fix your wedding." But the more degrees I do, I get one more year. Just one year more where I'm free.*

Pooja had frequently switched career paths during her university studies and had completed multiple master's degrees in business and in law. Provided that she could demonstrate to her parents that her many degrees were "worth the investment" and make her more attractive as a potential wife, she was permitted to put off marriage for another year.

Although none of the women I spoked with mentioned physical abuse in their own marriages, the threat of such abuse frequently came up. Aarti's wife-beating cousin was one such figure; Pooja knew a divorcee in her mother's natal family in Udaipur who had had a love marriage with her husband and had gone back to her parents after her husband punched her after only six weeks of marriage. Women were often reluctant to tell me stories of abuse that had occurred in their own lives or amongst their own families, but often told me about outrages and violence that had occurred outside of Jaipur, especially in rural areas—where, women told me, ladies did not understand their bodies or their rights, and were more likely to be subject to the violence of husbands and in-laws over ill-performed duties, dowry, or the inability to bear children. One woman told me she could not understand why I had chosen to work with women in urban environments, since "our men are liberal in their thinking" and "women don't have such problems here." Nevertheless, young unmarried women and newly married women frequently ruminated on the potential that spouses could turn violent, or that in-laws could make demands

that would lead to abuse. Questions of dowry, widely practiced amongst Rajput families in Jaipur, often were at the center of these narratives; Aarti and Narayan Singh had been nearly bankrupted by providing dowry for Janaki, as even "liberal-minded" Ashok had asked for fixed deposits, new cars, and jewelry to protect Janaki from the potential violence of her parents' failure to provide. During my fieldwork, the Rathods were still struggling to recoup the dowry costs, and belt-tightening meant that the family, especially the women, were limited in their pleasures—dinners out, movies, candy, shopping, and other diversions were usually impossible.

More common forms of anxiety stemmed from mothers who frequently complained that, after their marriages, they were unable to pursue the hobbies and activities they enjoyed. Both Aarti and Divya had been forced to give up their hobbies on marriage—Aarti had had to quit the arts-and-crafts classes she enjoyed, while Divya had no longer been able to play basketball. Both claimed that this was because marriage meant unending domestic labor that prevented the cultivation of hobbies; "after marriage," Aarti said, "there is no time." Yet both of their husbands were able to pursue their hobbies—Narayan Singh in gardening and his brother Dev Pratap in photography. Narayan Singh put it this way: "Before marriage, there's nothing but timepass for a girl. After marriage, well—it's nothing but salt and pepper, nothing but *rasoi* (the kitchen)."

There was no guarantee that one's husband would prove to be considerate or even willing to have intimacy, as Pooja knew well from her observation of her parents' marriage. Even when the relationship between husband and wife was intimate and trusting, the close environment of many joint families did not provide much opportunity for private time, particularly for sexual intimacy. Many women were reluctant to talk to me about the details of their sexual relationships with their husbands; however, younger married women like Janaki often expressed frustration that their husband's work and their own duties prevented them from spending as much time

together as they would have liked. Janaki told me once that she couldn't even have a phone conversation with her husband when he was away without some relative listening on the other line, trying to figure out what they could tease Janaki about as soon as she got off the phone. As Phillip Lutgendorf (2002) has discussed, the expectation and desire for privacy in one's marital household has emerged in tandem with larger structures to joint family systems generally; cultural artifacts like *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law/daughter-in-law) soap operas focus on the tension between a young wife's desire for privacy and sexual intimacy and the mother-in-law's representative nostalgia for the joint family system. This tension was apparent in many young marriages, and was something many young unmarried women remarked on. One young woman from the neighborhood, attending the wedding of another local girl, turned to me and said, "Well, he (the groom) is nice enough, but so boring. I hope he will satisfy her completely at least once in her life. Doesn't everyone deserve that?" This woman's assessment of the groom as "so boring," and her speculation on his sexual prowess, tie together this anxiety over intimacy in two ways—access to physical enjoyment and pleasure, and greater mental stimulation of the mind with one's spouse.

If every choice to enter into a kinship network through marriage and the union of families is a gamble psychologically and physically, why enter into it at all? Like all family networks, the family network that exists for the Rathods is one in which tradeoffs of power are constantly being made. While women may chafe against expectations and boundaries set for them, they also leverage caste and class power to enjoy privileges which are not available to Dalit and poor women, whose sexual autonomy is less secure, and whose lack of caste and financial security opens them up to greater levels of sexual exploitation and violence.[10] The networks of caste and

[10] Andrea Dworkin (1978) has summed this dynamic up well in her explanation of the white right-wing marriage in the United States: "Traditional marriage means selling to one man not hundreds: the better deal."

family that the Rathod women enter provide safety, financial security, and access to an upwardly mobile lifestyle, buttressed by the social and financial support they enjoy as members of an authoritative group. Even the tense state of seclusion, by allowing women to set themselves apart as members of a higher, more rational, more sexually continent group of people, provides social benefit, particularly within village and kinship networks. And, both this high status, and the sense that something is not quite right or unstuck in time, have allowed women like the Rathods to gain entry into the public sphere in this current era of Hindu nationalist majoritarian politics, both through their own assertion of themselves as deserving of special consideration and in their strategic weaponization of feeling out-of-place or unacceptability as a critique of liberal secularism. It is to this weaponization that I turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

O MERI SELFIE KI RANI: CRISES OF ELITENESS IN URBAN JAIPUR

What is at stake for non-elite middle-class women and their quest for upward mobility? How do women perceive "elite" lifestyles, and what hopes do they have for the acquisition of these lifestyles? Understanding the characteristics of the "elite" class in Delhi and the necessary requirements for entry into this class necessitates a knowledge of the particular functions of caste, class performativity, and regional belonging in urban and urbanizing North India. In this chapter, I outline first the relationship between dominant-caste positionality and class identity amongst my Rajput interlocutors in Jaipur, and how my women interlocutors perceived the characteristics of elite identity and the mechanisms through which they hoped to either enter into this elite class or to successfully perform as if they were already members. I next discuss how the gendered experiences of elite and non-elite women are perceived in Indian print media, through an analysis of two Hindi-language women's magazines and one English-language women's magazine. Arguing that the elite urban classes can be perceived as an example of new reimaginings of caste in urban India, I then suggest that non-elite women who unsuccessfully perform eliteness in mixed-class public spaces, such as cafes, malls, theaters, and the ephemeral "public space" of the internet, are at risk of "caste punishment" through ritual humiliation and mockery. I finally conclude with an analysis of how the threat of unsuccessful elite integration leads to restrictions on public participation and individual expression by non-elite middle-class women.

It is necessary first to define what I mean by "elite" and "non-elite" middle-class constituencies. I follow Steve Derné's (2012) argument that middle-class integration in India was

not uniformly applied, with the bottom half of the Indian middle class, although financially comfortable, unable to access the trappings of globalization so available to the elite classes. Reasons for this "failure to globalize" stem from a number of different factors, including level of education attained, regional origin, caste, opportunities for steady employment, and religious affiliation. Right-wing politics are often conceived of as a "middle-class" phenomenon in India; the demographics of right-wing affiliation, however, vary. North Indian Baniyas and Kayasthas, who have formed the backbone of traditional pan-Indian right-wing organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, differ in their community identities and class perception than the working-class Maharashtrians who make up the traditional support of the Marathi nativist Shiv Sena, who have clashed with the RSS' political wing in the form of the Bharatiya Janata Party. In Rajasthan, the wave of cow lynchings and anti-Dalit violence that have hallmarked the latter part of the 2010s have been led by regionally powerful castes such as Gurjars and Yadavs, who differ from the Rajputs and Jains who dominate right-wing politics in Jaipur and the state's other urban centers.

All of these groups have faced different and incomplete experiences with globalization and reform into middle-class life because of their varying regional and social identities, and there remained in my interlocutors an acute perception of how middle-class identity played out, and the restrictions on their political selves that were reined in by their specific experiences of middle-class identity. My interlocutors came from powerful landowning Rajput families who had enjoyed a high level of caste-based respect, particularly in the era before independence when they enjoyed the patronage of the royal families of the erstwhile princely states. Following decline and end of the Rajput princely states, families like the Rathods found themselves unable to understand the new "language" of global eliteness. They had enjoyed a status as powerful

allies of the royal family for hundreds of years, and their wives and daughters enjoyed a particularly privileged status as high-value women whom the world could not touch. In a world in which this status was less important than the markings of global eliteness, how could they make sense of who they were, and how could they feel good about who they were in this brave new world?

For middle-class Rajput women like the Rathod women, their experience of gender—the specific identity of the globalized Indian woman that they saw as a figurehead to aspire to—was informed not only by their ability to participate in the global economic market and their consumption of different kinds of goods that were made available post-liberalization, but in their ability to successfully perform a particular kind of gendered persona—that of the "modern Indian woman." For my older interlocutors, perceptions of the "modern Indian woman" was closely allied to the technological and economic experiences of liberalization in the early 1990s—that is, it was explicitly linked to a notion of "desiring subjectivities" rooted in consumption as an expression of upward mobility and class identity. For their daughters and daughters-in-law, this subjectivity was complicated by a desire not just for new forms of consumption, but for a more explicit public self, in which the successful performance of eliteness opened avenues for more regular—and more valued—self-expression on both the national and global stage. Unsuccessful performance of eliteness on this public stage served not only to be a point of personal humiliation, but also signified an inability to create and effective public self.

Gone With the Wind: Long Memories of Caste

Walking through the tourist districts in Jaipur or Udaipur, it is likely you will come across a street musician singing one of the state's most famous folk songs, *O mhaare ghoomar che nakhrali haaye maa* ("O mother, my *ghoomar*[11] is so bewitching")

O mhaane Rathoda ri boli heera toli haaye Maa
O mhaane Rathoda ra painch pyaara laage haaye Maa
O mhaane Rathoda re ghar bhal dijiyo haaye Maa
O mhaare ghoomar che nakhrali haaye Maa

O mother, the customs of the Rathods are like diamonds
O mother, the Rathods are the most loveable of all
O mother, marry me off to the Rathods
O mother, my ghoomar is so bewitching

The Rathod clan, of which the Rathod family itself is of course allied, is one of the oldest, largest, and most prominent clans in Rajputana, with a hereditary territory spreading from Jodhpur in the west to Bikaner in the north to Sitamau in the present-day state of Madhya Pradesh. When I heard this song sung in Udaipur, the name of the Rathods was changed to their caste rivals the Sisodias, who have ruled Udaipur since the eleventh century and who claim superior status to the Rathods, since they never married their daughters off to Muslims (Bose 2015, 37). The Sisodias displayed their opposition to Mughal rule not only through military means, but through the medium of socio-cultural exchange—that is, the literal exchange of women between households. The Sisodias saw the marriage of Rajput daughters into Mughals courts as so polluting that entire clan lineages were stained by such a marriage, relegating those politically savvy clans who had sought advancement through the contraction of political marriages to the realm of families forever stained through a lack of attention to caste purity. Rajput self-advancement is dependent on *roti-beti* (bread and daughter) relations, interdining and

[11] Referring to a style of dance closely associated with Rajasthan and particularly with Rajput women.

intermarrying between clans. Girls and young women have historically had a good sense of what clans were appropriate for marriage and what life would be like amongst each clan; evidence of this collective gendered caste memory is evident in women's marriage songs collected by Winifred Bryce in the 1930s. In one such song, a girl pleads with her father not to be married off into Bikaner, ruled by a Rathod cadet house, because of the relentless heat of the desert and the presumed abuse she will suffer in a faraway, barren country (Bryce 1939, 54). In another, the singer, presumably a Sisodia lady, laments leaving behind "the Rana's balconies" and the "bank of Lake Pichola" in the city of Udaipur and the fertile country of Mewar for a "foreign country," presumably to the territory of one of the desert clans, in which the beauty of the Mewari lowlands is less apparent (Bryce 91). Remnants of the Sisodia clan pride, which prized their genteel lifestyle and their cultural homogeneity, remain as folk memories in these contemporary songs of middle-class Rajput village women.

One also hears in these songs the importance of the exchange of women as clan commodities (women are not married to individual men, but are "married off" into cities and princely states) as well as the memorialized geography of Rajputana as carried mentally by Rajput women, whose circulation through various natal and marital households allowed for a kind of folk compendium of princely clans and their individual traits. Some clans were more desirable than other because of their caste purity or what the folk songs call their *pyaari boli*—their good speech or good manners. In a folk milieu where other songs have titles like *Sasu mat lad nyaari kar de* ("Mother-in-law, don't beat me, stay far away") and *Baisara beera mhane pihariya le chalo sa, saasariya mae kayin dukh paayo* ("O my husband, take me back to my natal household, I am suffering in my in-laws' house"), the promise of being married into a family whose customs were known as refined and genteel (what Pooja Rathod might have called

'high class' and what her mother might have called 'hi-fi') is a powerful historical motivator for upwardly mobile women.

Legacies of these folk memories remained amongst the Rajput families I worked with in Jaipur. The Rathods themselves were low-level members of a cadet branch who had served as governors under the Kachhwaha Rajputs, who had ruled Jaipur and the surrounding state of Amber since the twelfth century. The history of the Kachhwaha Rajputs it in itself a microhistory of the power of "marrying up;" the Kachhwahas are alleged to have begun as *Shudra* pastoralists who had leveraged Rajput Kshatriya status and solidified their political authority through advantageous marriages with other Rajput groups and into the Mughal court. Heer Kunwar, the famous princess of Amber and wife of Akbar better known as Jodha Bai, was a daughter of the Kachhwaha dynasty. Out of obligation to years of faithful military service, the Kachhwaha rulers of Amber had given a *thakurana,* a titled land grant, to the ancestors of the Rathods; the Rathods ruled their small freehold from the village of Champa Gaon in current-day Tonk district, collecting taxes and crop revenues from the villagers and performing all the ceremonial functions that they were especially obligated to perform. Such a trajectory is not at all uncommon amongst the Rajputs as a whole. Despite their strong caste consciousness and shared caste history, "Rajputs" as a caste encompass several dozen groups who did not always (allegedly) hold Kshatriya caste status. The work of the British chronicler James Tod solidified the concept of the region's fort-building knightly class as a caste group with shared traditions and history; yet this caste, ever self-advancing, had not existed as a coherent group prior to Tod's own work. Udaipur's City Palace, once the seat of the ruling Sisodias and today a museum, displays a memorial to Tod, and yearly gives a Colonel James Tod Award to a foreign national whose work best aligns with "the spirit and history of Mewar" (Royal Asiatic Society).

As long as the Kachhwahas were in power, the Rathods could hold on to their caste folk history of their status as vassal knights and genteel landowners. Contracting marriages with other Rajput families in neighboring villages and regions, along with strict observation of caste purity customs such as mandatory veiling and seclusion of wives, maintained this history. Collection of revenues from their tenant farmers provided them with revenues to build a fine *haveli* in Champa Gaon and outfit themselves with the jewelry, clothing, and weaponry that were de rigeur in any noble Rajput household. Yet the decline of the British and the establishment of an independent India struck the Rathods, along with all of the princely classes in Rajputana, very hard. Some of the hereditary lands of the Rathods in Tonk were ceded to the state government, or were sold off. Many Rajput landowners found themselves turning their family *havelis* into hotels and museums, and selling off their jewelry and ceremonial knives to museums and private collectors. Cousins of the Rathods who had built a fine *haveli* just outside of Laxmi Gardens in Jaipur as well as a country *haveli* on the Jaipur-Agra highway continue to run them both, along with another country *haveli* in Tonk sold to them by another Rajput family, as luxury hotels.

Sharad Chari (2004), in his study of village micropolitics and economic productivity in rural Tamil Nadu, has argued that the failure of landowning castes to successfully transition to an industrial/service-based economy has its roots in the alienation of landowners themselves from working life and the intimate social relationships necessary between workers in an industrial or service-based framework. Unable to make that necessary social transition, and still tied to caste-based notions of land supremacy that had little meaning in the post-Rajputana world, many landowning caste families suffered from lack of knowledge and lack of relationship-building. This was certainly the case of the Rathods. The post-independence generation of Rathod men in Champa Gaon were obligated to find work outside of the village, and the Rathod brothers

Narayan Singh and Dev Pratap had worked intermittently in Delhi before returning to Jaipur to work in industrial manufacturing. Prior to their return to Jaipur their work histories had been spotty, although both were educated; Pooja told me that they simply "did not know how to work," reflecting Chari's language of alienation from the means of production. Their mid-level management jobs, which they sometimes self-depricatingly called "private jobs,"[12] Their country *haveli* in Tonk was in disrepair, but the Rathod city *haveli* at Radheshyam Lane, where the family still lived, was in good condition, and the two brothers, assisted by their parents and wives, began to rent out rooms in the house to foreign tourists, who sought to experience traditional Rajput hospitality by living with a "real Rajput family." Eventually, the family, bristling at the thought that they were playacting at their heritage to foreigners, transitioned to running the house as a PG (paying guest) scheme, renting out rooms to female University of Rajasthan students and, eventually, foreigners who had come to Jaipur not as tourists but as Hindi students, looking for cheap rooms with a Hindi-speaking family near the local language institute. Although the Rathods kept in contact with some of the European tourists they had grown close to during the guesthouse years, they were often uncomfortable discussing that time in the Radheshyam Lane house, especially discussing any implication that out of financial hardship they had "served" the foreigners as cooks or maids. Janaki and her husband Ashok had briefly tried to run a guesthouse catering to French tourists following their marriage, and it had fizzled out as Ashok began to make more money and they no longer needed to put their culture on display.

[1212] In Indian English the term "private job" refers to any private-sector job, but the Rathods, and many other Indians I knew, used it somewhat derisively to refer to a low-paying middle-management job, such as a factory manager (the job both Rathod brothers held) or clerk. They distinguished it from an "MNC job," a higher-paying white-collar job, such as the engineering position in Bangalore than Pooja's older brother Veer held.

These household arrangements suited neither the wives, who had come from wealthy Rajput families themselves and had not expected to work so hard after marriage, nor the brothers, whose memories of life as village *Thakurs* continued to frame their sense of self. This was particularly true of Narayan Singh, the elder son and the family's leader. His mental map of his family's world prior to their decline had all the tender fondness of a nostalgic novel; when he discussed his childhood memories he described picking mangoes in the orchards of the royal family, the farmlands, the festivals where villagers honored them by touching their foreheads to their feet. He was angry that Sukhi, his son and heir, had little-to-no interest in learning about the remaining obligations of village headship, and worried he might have to sell his land. He had encyclopedic knowledge of which lands had been his family's, during the period of British rule; standing outside the decayed family *haveli* in Champa Gaon, he would point to the vast stretches of flat green-and-yellow farmland, on which his family's former tenant farmers grew soybeans and mustard, and say, "*British ke time mein, sab hamaare thein."* ("This was all ours, in the time of the British"). He still collected some revenues from the village, was responsible for settling disputes and performing ceremonial rites at village festivals and at weddings and funerals, but one got the distinct sense that this was a role which no longer had any real political force behind it; people in Champa Gaon still referred to Narayan Singh respectfully as *Thakur sahab* and his son Sukhi as *banna sa,* but this did not essentially change the slightly diminished material circumstances that the Rathods found themselves in. He married his daughter into a family which upheld Rajput caste values, such as seclusion and veiling of women, and who were slightly richer than his own family, but the pressures of providing dowry had bankrupted him and left him weary and introspective. He began to worry about his family's spending, and disallowed

shopping for clothes, dinners out, and trips to the cinema hall—he felt that since the expense of the wedding, they could not recoup their costs, and everyone must cut back.

The women of the household, already frustrated by the circumstances into which they had married, viewed this sudden tightening of the belt with extreme anxiety and annoyance. Aarti's dream, for example, had long been a refit of her kitchen, which had been virtually untouched since the 1920s. The kitchen, which was small and had open windows without a screen, was freezing cold in the winter and extremely hot in the summer, and the porous stone surfaces collected and held water easily, attracting insects through the open windows at night. Grease dripped down from an industrial fan that Narayan Singh had installed for her to use in the summer, but the fan itself was moldy and smelled bad. After walking into the kitchen one evening and being confronted with an eleven-inch-long lizard sitting in the sink, Aarti had decided enough was enough. She had always wanted to have air conditioning installed in the kitchen, but she began to appeal for a complete renovation in earnest. The family had already renovated the living room and the bedrooms in 2016; why not the kitchen as well? Aarti told Narayan Singh that no daughter-in-law would be willing to marry into a household with the kitchen in such a state of disrepair, and regularly appealed to me to "speak to him" about the air conditioner. "Would your mother want to work in a kitchen such as this?" she asked me. "She certainly wouldn't."

The implication of Aarti's threat about the state of the house being a possible impediment to Sukhi's marriage was more than an empty threat; after all, they were relying on the dowry a future daughter-in-law would bring into the household to recoup their own dowry costs. One could no longer bank on name and family history alone; it was imperative that everything in the house be *hi-fi,* high-class, new, modern, and gleaming. They had gotten their daughter married

into a house that had such new things—a working AC, a new kitchen, a new car (although it had been substantially financed by Narayan Singh as part of his 'wedding gift to his daughter' and was in Janaki's name), and if they wanted to get a daughter-in-law as high-quality as Janaki was, they needed to look the part of an upwardly mobile urban family. A new kitchen in which the daughter-in-law could work was not a luxury, but absolutely imperative.

Aarti pulled her ideas about how the kitchen would look from advertisements printed in two of her favorite Hindi ladies' magazines, *Meri Saheli ("My Girlfriend")* and *Vanitha* (*"Woman"*), which she read faithfully every month. Magazines continue to be a preferred form of media for many Indians of all ages, who are already avid newspaper and novel readers; in a country where less than half of the population are regular Internet users, magazines are an accessible way for Indians across classes to encounter aspirational goods (World Bank). *Meri Saheli* and *Vanitha,* as magazines geared towards middle-class Hindi-speaking women, featured ads focusing primarily on household and cosmetic goods. These magazines feature model kitchens depicted in advertisements for kitchenware and home goods, and it was from these model kitchens that Aarti took the idea for her "dream kitchen." Kitchens in these

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advertisements gleamed with chrome and marble; European models as well as well-known actors like Akshay Kumar and Vidya Balan advertised granite flooring and countertops, "Italian-made" plumbing fixtures, state-of-the-art appliances and cookware, paint, and plumbing and air-conditioning systems. Many of these advertisements were in English, making them anomalies in magazines in which all of the content, and most of the advertisements, were in Hindi.

While men may be the primary decisionmakers about purchases and economics in the household, advertisements geared towards women indicate that wives and daughters play important roles in how households delegate their income, and show the kinds of goods that wives and daughters are presumed to desire. Oftentimes, women-oriented advertisements for home improvement products are geared towards the preservation of family health. This is the case in the pages of Hindi women's magazines and in television advertisements that run during the hours of 4 PM and 8 PM, when Hindi serials air on cable channels like Star Plus, Sony Colors, and Zee. For example, Asian Paints aired frequent advertisements during these hours for its Royale Health Shield antibacterial paint; these ads featured pregnant wives and their husbands discussing the benefits of antibacterial paint for their urban, middle-class families. Similar ads aired in Tamil and Marathi in southern and western India. Advertisements for Ayurvedic health products often showed mothers with children, advertising the use of Ayurveda as a hygienic method of preserving family health. Food ads, as well, emphasized purity and cleanliness; spices were described as "pure and unadulterated" by additives and dyes, oil was "clean and heart-healthy" and rice was grown in the foothills of the Himalayas from "pure water and soil." One can see in these advertisements reflections of what Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) has located as a central anxiety of the modern Indian household—the ongoing quest for cleanliness and purity. Rooted in European racial science that presumed that Indian households were by their very

nature disorganized and unclean, the drive for hygiene amongst middle-class families has led to a craze for "pure" and "organic" food, drink, and household goods, wholesome paints, and forever gleaming, spotless homes. Shoma Munshi (2010) has called this advertising tendency part of the "managerial redefinition" of the Indian household, in which the language of medical science is married with typical "maternal angst" over the health of one's children. For foreign companies like Kellogg's, this marriage was perfect in promoting traditional Western breakfast foods like cornflakes over typical North Indian breakfasts like *aloo paratha* and *poori-sabji;* by advertising that Kellogg's cereals were "toasted, not fried…98-99% fat-free and 100% cholesterol free," Kellogg's signified to Indian mothers that their products were key not only to the physical health of their families, but were connected to elite ideas of Western nutrition that saw typically heavy Indian breakfast foods as, quite literally, weighing down on domestic happiness.

Aarti's anxiety regarding the cleanliness of her kitchen was rooted not only in her own discomfort but in the potential bad example it set for other families who came to their home, particularly those families who came seeking marriage matches. Rooted in fears of dirt and disorder is a historical crisis in modernity, rooted in the nationalistic process, in which true nationalist women found themselves able to balance the demands of typical family life, with its flesh and mess, with the scientific hygienic experiment that the nationalist project demanded. The "modern" woman not only does it all, but she cleans up after herself afterwards.

Cleanliness and purity are not the only mitigating factors in how upwardly mobile women choose products to aspire to and eventually purchase. Advertisements for kitchenware, home goods, food items like spices, oil, rice, and flour, and cosmetic and health products indicated that *Vanitha* and *Meri Saheli* primarily saw their readers as wives, mothers, and household managers, but blended the everyday function of these items with references to luxury,

the global market, and technological advancement. An ad in *Vanitha* for Prestige kitchenware featuring Vidya Balan, advertising the stovetop pressure cookers that are central to meal preparation in many Indian households, claimed that their range of pressure cookers were "the most dependable and innovative…you can choose your favorite model from our unique and attractive range." Another ad in *Meri Saheli* for Coloressence *kajal* (eyeliner) advertises "world class products, German pigments, Indian price." Products that had associations with foreign countries, especially the US and Europe, were highly prized, even when Indian versions were produced and available for sale locally. I sometimes received packages of American food and cosmetic products from friends still in the United States, and my interlocutors often placed "orders" with me for cosmetics and sweets, especially lipstick and chocolate. My mother, in particular, usually sent Maybelline lipsticks, which were available in India, but my interlocutors were particularly interested in the sense of luxury and exoticism that owning and using foreign goods provided. Pooja told me about her excitement when Chachi, a Spanish woman in her mid-sixties who had stayed frequently at Radheshyam Lane when it was a guesthouse and who visited the household two or three times a year in the company of her much-younger Malayali husband, brought her European cosmetics:

> *P: Chachi, one Spanish lady, knows I love lipsticks, so whenever she used to come, she used to bring me lipsticks from Spain. Now, I used to feel so proud that this is from foreign, not India.*

Pooja, whose frustration with her family circumstances was well-known, was particularly frustrated by her family's financial situation. Although they were hereditary Thakurs and enjoyed a significant amount of caste privilege, particularly in Champa Gaon, she was acutely aware that the Rathods' high caste position did not always translate to actual economic reality.

Dev Pratap was particularly concerned about Pooja and her spending. Pooja liked expensive clothing, shoes, and cosmetics, as well as sweets and edible treats like Lay's potato chips and Mirinda orange cola, and Dev Pratap was strict about what she could buy and when. I had planned to bring her along with me to Delhi on one of my university visits, so that she could shop at the famous Sarojini Nagar secondhand clothing market, a longtime dream of hers; but Dev Pratap, nervous not only about his daughter being alone in a strange city but also about the money she might spend in the market, ultimately did not give her permission to accompany me.

Depressed over her family circumstances and frustrated at her lack of access to the material goods she desired, Pooja put her hopes in her eventual marriage for the advancement she sought. Although her cousin Janaki's marriage was not without its problems, she had married into a family with considerably more material wealth and with more educational opportunities; Pooja saw in Janaki's material circumstances a chance to marry "up." She described it thus:

This thing always makes me feel so scared because sometimes I feel like okay—So what I want basically—I think I will not get this kind of thing, and it makes me feel more sad. So when I see my house, it's good, it's beautiful, it's nice. But when I see my other relatives' houses, their houses have, like, perfect things. Like their glass (windows) is also good, it's a very royal kind of glass because we are Rajputs and we like to put royal things in our houses. So that kind of family I want, it should be like a royal kind. All Rajputs are royal, but (my eventual house should) still be more fashionable. [Their house's interior] should be so beautiful. And more freedom, like girls can wear whatever.

"What do you mean by freedom?" I asked her. She continued:

I have seen so many weddings that were so expensive! But my family isn't that rich. So it can't be like that. So when my father talks about the wedding thing, it's all opposite to my dream wedding. So now I just stop thinking about it. I'm like "Okay, this wedding will just be like a normal wedding. No special wedding kind of thing." It will be just a wedding, and their responsibility will be finished. I'm very judgmental. When I see other people's houses I judge them so easily, I just start thinking, "I want this kind of a thing. It should be like this or something." For example, if I like this picture, this painting or something, I'll just be like, "Oh, if my dream house will be there, I'll put this painting, this color, this kind of floor. But sometimes when they find a normal person, like a normal middle-class family just like us [for a rishta], I feel like saying, "Why? This family is the same as that family. So, you've not given me any

freedom." So, try to find some boy who can give me that kind of freedom. Because it's like, there's only one life.

She told, again, the story of her aunt Aarti's refusal to cook and clean as a young *bahu* in her marital household, because she was the daughter of a Superintendent of Police and had managed to leverage her class positionality in a way that her mother Divya, also the daughter of a government pensioner, did not. Both Aarti and Divya had come from families that, although they were still Rajputs, were not hereditary landowners and thus had less caste prestige than the Rathods. Yet Aarti and Divya's families had both been more financially comfortable than the Rathods, who seemed to have had generational struggles with money, despite their comfortable placement as genteel country people with farmhouses, fields, and many indentured tenants.

The financial circumstances in which Aarti and Divya had been raised were similar, and yet only Aarti had managed to leverage those financial circumstances, and the presumed lifestyle and attitudes towards women's labor that those circumstances were presumed to have afforded her, into a modicum of preferred treatment and freedom from what Pooja had always perceived as "drudgery." Chief in Pooja's mind, too, was the relationship between class positionality and gender liberation that many of my interlocutors believed in. Wealthier families, who were more exposed to global and secular culture, were presumed to have moved "beyond" the culturally-bounded roles that supposedly existed in non-elite middle-class homes. Pooja, for example, believed that marriage into a wealthy family would provide her with liberation from the pressures of dowry and lack of privacy from her in-laws, even as she was presented with evidence that such pressures were just as existent in wealthy families as in non-elite families. She described a recent *rishta* that had arrived for her, from a wealthy Rajput family whose son was a legal official:

P: It's not always fault of my parents, it's like Rajputs, they want dowry. So, there's one boy, who is a judge right now and he wants ₹30 lakh cash and one luxury car in the wedding and I'm like, "How you can do this?"

R: He's a judge?

P: Yeah. He's a judge. Look—so many families, they give dowry. A girl Janaki knows from Padmini Nagar—her father-in-law also demanded a car from her father, so he gave him a car. He also demanded for cash. So, her father gave him cash. And they also demanded, like, "We want this, we want that, we want this." They have given everything. But, that is Padmini Nagar. And sometimes I get rejected. Like, in a few [rishtas] I got rejected. I didn't feel bad at the time, because they thought, like, my father isn't…he's doing a private job. He will not be able to fulfill their demands, according to them. I was very shocked…they were super-rich, and they liked my photo. For five days my aunt was the mediator. They were continuously asking, like, what I do. "Oh, she is studying law." They were happy. "Okay, that's good." And then they wanted to know, "What does her father do?" After that, they didn't reply. I felt so bad, and then Mummy was like, "Oh, sometimes you'll be rejected because of your father," and my father also said it. "This is a destiny kind of thing." He told me, "Wherever your wedding is written [in your destiny], that's where you'll go."

Elsewhere, Pooja drew a connection between the restrictions placed on her by her family's caste position and caste consciousness and her own chances for upward mobility on her own terms. Her best friend, Vaidehi, was a Kumawat, a Rajasthan-defined Other Backward Caste (Pooja classified them as a "builder" caste, perhaps referring to them as a *Shudra* community). She described Vaidehi's life in terms of the liberal conditions under which she had been raised, with a working mother and an executive father who were permissive about their daughter's romantic relations and the possibility of inter-caste mixing:

> *P: My best friend is a Kumawat…her family, her parents are very chilled. She has a boyfriend and her parents know about her boyfriend and they are really okay with it. And her mother is a teacher and her father is in an MNC, some manager kind of thing. They are very chilled, okay. And the boy is also from another caste.*
>
> *R: Okay. That wouldn't be possible in your family?*
>
> *P: In my family, maybe they'll kill me, or they'll kick me out. Not kill, but they'll kick me out.*

Pooja viewed Vaidehi's life with considerable envy; Vaidehi's body, in her mind, did not hold the same threat of caste violation that her own body held. That Vaidehi could (it was implied) engage freely in premarital romantic and sexual activity, and that too with a boy of another caste, became a source of critique both towards the caste hierarchy under which Pooja lived, and towards her own family for the violence that she was sure they would engage in to enforce it. This critique of caste became blended with a fantasy of sexual and public freedom, such as she imagined the worldly Vaidehi had because of her worldly family and their successful integration into the global middle class. Pooja's aspirations far surpassed the imaginings of her aunt and her mother, whose dreams were primarily articulated through a desire for goods—a new kitchen or new makeup. Pooja did not just want the "beautiful, royal things" that made up the economic trappings of high-caste, high-class Rajput identity. She wanted the world.

Pooja and her family's acute awareness of the ambiguity of their class positionality was mediated by the fact that they lived alongside Americans, the "moderns" par excellence, in their capacity as landlords and "host parents." American students, particularly young American women, regularly leveled critiques of Jaipur's social conservatism that reflected some of what Pooja mounted as her critique of Rajput culture. American students, for example, bristled at the expectation that they might be asked to have a curfew or forgo wearing shorts, but they enjoyed considerably more freedom—and positive treatment—than their Indian counterparts. Jaipur, a genteel tourist city, had a reputation for obsequiousness towards white people that I attempted to level to help Pooja get some access to the life she felt she could live, but it produced considerable anxiety in both her and me. The stark difference in how whites were treated in Jaipur and how non-elite locals were treated was often as a source of anxiety and critique both for foreigners and for locals. As a white foreigner, I often received preferential treatment from restaurant managers,

store owners, taxi drivers, and police officers. When socializing with groups of Indians, I was often able to leverage this preferential treatment to make sure that all were treated well—in one case, pretending to be a "foreign tourist" to get after-hours access to a local historical site, and in other cases, getting our tables in restaurants served more quickly and our needs in shops assisted more efficiently. The presence of my white body in these ambiguous moments was, for me, a fount of intense anxiety, a meta-critique of the same social hierarchies that gave the women I worked with anxiety over the proper performance of elite identity.

One afternoon in late July, Pooja, Sukhi, their cousins Prem and Harsh, some of the neighborhood girls, and I attended a procession at Tripolia Gate in the Walled City for the women's festival of Hariyali Teej, celebrated every year with great pomp and pageantry around the maharaja's former palace. The day was excruciatingly hot, and we had all piled into an autorickshaw and then walked the remaining two miles, and we had arrived to find that the procession had already started and that the crowd of people was impenetrable. When I had attended a similar procession for the festival of Gangaur in the spring, I had been permitted to sit on the balcony of an abandoned hotel in the Walled City, in an area nominally reserved "for foreigners" but where I had seen well-dressed Indians being seated. We found the stairwell to the upper balcony and were met by an officer of the Jaipur Metropolitan Police, who pointed at the group of Indians accompanying me and informed me that they could not come up. "Only you can go up."

"But they're my *friends."*

The officer shook his head. Sensing that I would not win the argument, I next tried to argue that my friends were NRIs, unaccustomed to typical Indian festival crowds. "You will not let them up just because they are Indian?" I demanded. "That is *galat"* (wrong, immoral). "*Bhagwan ki aankhon ke beech mein sab eki hain"* (All are the same in the eyes of God).

"Write to the Tourist Board, then," the officer said, shrugging. "It isn't my rule. They're not NRIs. Either you come up alone or you don't come up at all."

I had expected my friends, especially Pooja, to be hurt at being turned away, but as we walked back towards Tripolia Gate she explained to me that it was to be expected that they would not have been allowed to freely intermix with foreigners. "Indians will rob and cheat foreigners," she explained, while Prem and Harsh nodded in agreement. "Foreigners should not stand in these crowds. We even get afraid of it sometimes. Even we get robbed and cheated." Pooja's response to the special segregation of large events like Hariyali Teej—the literal physical separation of white foreigners and affluent Indians from middle- and working-class Indians, with the foreign and the affluent seated "above" the milling and presumed-volatile crowd is not dissimilar from opinions I heard from other middle-class Indians, even when this physical segregation implied that they belonged amongst the madding crowd.

Such segregation is common at large events and tourist sites across India; at the Taj Mahal, the Wagah border crossing in Punjab, and Lal Qila in Delhi, foreigners are whisked through separate lines, divided by gender just as the Indian lines are. Ostensibly this is because of a need for greater security scrutiny for foreigners, who must have their passports checked; nevertheless, the speed and efficiency with which one is processed, and the obsequiousness of police and security guards, is in sharp contrast to the sometimes cattle-car nature of the Indian security lines. Many of my Indian interlocutors informed me that this was to be expected, since foreigners paid sometimes five or six times the ticket price. I was told that people in Jaipur, an extremely tourist-heavy city, were used to seeing this kind of behavior play out. In the case of the hotel balcony, Pooja and Prem repeatedly urged me to go upstairs on my own, leaving them behind. Out of my own discomfort with the situation I refused, and we were eventually able to find a place to watch

on the street. Pooja told me later that she and her parents were aware of the preferential treatment foreigners received in Jaipur, and that part of the reason she was permitted to socialize alone with Americans, including with young American men, is that Americans were considered to be honest, forthright, modest, and respectful of Indian gender and class roles, whereas Indians had no such consideration. Westernness and whiteness were considered amongst Jaipur's middle-classes to be synonymous with rationality, sexual and emotional continence, and respect; they did not necessarily ascribe such values to themselves. In cases where whites in their circle acted in a manner that violated these rules, the punishments were relatively less severe.

It is impossible not to think of the dichotomous nature of William Mazzarella's (2013) "pissing man," the prototypical figure of the working-class Indian man urinating on a public street whose unruly, violent, and unhygienic body becomes the foil against which elite Indian publics must guard themselves and society. The specter of the pissing man—or pissing woman, as the case may be—emerged frequently throughout the course of my fieldwork. The Rathod women, and many of their relatives and neighbors, seemed to self-identify in a shadow space in between the unruly "pissing man" and the elite Indian public, who held a kind of social continence that marked them as worthy of participation in public life. By virtue of their Indian-ness, and their failure to achieve the markers of class that would have admitted them to a more global habitus, they often ascribed to themselves the role of the unruly native, unable to fully occupy the role of the colonial *babu or* the white-adjacent global citizen. This was not necessarily an act of self-loathing, such as Chakrabarty ascribes to his colonial scholars, but it was tinged with a sense of regret, or "being-out-of-time," as Purnima Mankekar (2010) describes the feeling of the unwillingly and incompletely globalized in urban Delhi. This ambiguous feeling—a sense of confusion or disarray of who and what one is—is further nailed down by Sianne Ngai (2005)'s description of "ugly

feelings"—affective states which do not produce further action, but instead create a "dysphoric affect…lost on one's own 'cognitive map' of available affects" (14) that appear to "diagnose situations" (26) but are not in and of themselves a spur for political action. Nevertheless, the affective states available to women as they engaged with me provided, as Ngai states, a "diagnosis" of a problem, a sense that things as they stood were neither satisfying nor correct.

How do people come to see themselves as elite, non-elite, or incompletely made elite? Mankekar's exploration of incomplete globalization juxtaposes her dissatisfied Delhiites with dissatisfied members of the Indian diaspora, the truly globalized who nevertheless feel alienated from the localities that the associate with love, family, and the home. Indeed, allegiance to home, and preoccupation with the domestic, seemed amongst my interlocutors to be a primary tension in their own articulations of their experiences as moderns. There was a dichotomy between the globalized and the nonglobalized woman, and their own feelings about themselves were in an ambivalent third space, fitting neither the "globalized" woman nor the entirely "nonglobalized" woman whose preoccupations were much more local. How is this dichotomy constructed, and how do women come to learn about these two ghostly women who haunt their consciousness? I turn next to a discussion of two magazines—*Vanitha* and *Meri Saheli*—that were regular companions throughout the course of my fieldwork. These magazines were given to me by my interlocutors as sources from which they drew their images of what Indian women looked like, and how women came to be constituted as modern subjects. I depart somewhat from other media analyses that utilize film and television sources to understand the modern gender question in India simply because magazines were, for my secluded interlocutors (particularly my older interlocutors), a primary way that they engaged with media, particularly advertising media. Pooja watched bootleg Hindi films that were given to her on a flash drive by Sukhi, but there was little-to-no engagement

with the public sphere of Bollywood cinema; the theater was not a mediating space and was not a focal point of women's public lives. Television was more accessible but was often subject to the decisions of what *men* wanted to watch. Magazines were almost exclusively a feminine enterprise; Narayan Singh read a daily Hindi newspaper, but Aarti, Divya, Pooja, Janaki and I consumed magazines with great aplomb, cutting out cosmetics and saree ads and reading articles to each other (me translating English articles somewhat haphazardly). I therefore choose to focus on magazines firstly to understand the micro-specific ways that the Rathod women came to think and learn about what it means to be an elite, or non-elite, modern Indian woman.

Magazines and Modernity

When I first approached Aarti with the idea to conduct fieldwork in her family and with the women she knew, I was an avid reader of *Femina,* an English-language women's magazine that catered to an elite urban Indian audience. I was a devoted reader of *Vogue* and *Marie Claire* back in the United States, and *Femina,* with its articles on the best Ayurvedic retreats in Himachal Pradesh and its bright, sensual ads for the Sabyasachi atelier in Mumbai, scratched my aspirational itch. I had a habit of leaving multiple old copies of *Femina* around the house, a habit that Aarti, a neat freak, hated. "I think I'll use the *Feminas* to do my project," I told her one afternoon when she knocked on my bedroom door to return my magazines to me. "I want to see the things that are of concern to the modern Indian woman."

Aarti rolled her eyes. "Wait one second." She retreated into the Radheshyam Lane house's small, cramped attic and returned with a cardboard shoebox, which she unceremoniously dumped out onto my bed. Magazines with Hindi titles and bright covers, featuring smiling young saree-clad women, spilled out.

"Aunty, what are those?"

"My back issues," she said. "You want to know about the modern Indian woman? You should read these."

"But what about *Femina?"*

She rolled her eyes again. *"You* read *Femina."*

She had given me quite a bit of reading material. These were almost five years' worth of back issues of two women's magazines of which Aarti was a dedicated reader—*Vanitha* ("Woman") and *Meri Saheli* ("My Girlfriend"). *Vanitha* and *Meri Saheli* are part of India's multi-million-rupee women's magazine industry; *Vanitha,* published out of Kerala with editions published in Malayalam and Hindi, is India's most-circulated magazine, with a readership of over 2.2 million women. *Meri Saheli,* published in Mumbai, is edited by the former superstar actress and BJP politician Hema Malini. Articles on food, household care, child-rearing, and relationships focus on primarily middle- to lower-middle-class married women and mothers, and both focus on and describes itself on its website as follows:

> *Meri Saheli is India's best-selling monthly ladies' magazine, in which every effort is made to touch on every aspect related to women. On issues related to women, their ideals, their dreams, and their changing roles in changing times, Meri Saheli has always been with every lady as her true girlfriend and guide, so that every woman of the country can change her life for the better. So that we can go forward in the direction of living a good life.*
>
> *Whether it's beauty, fashion, education, career, saving her relationship, financial matters, or her rights, Meri Saheli makes the lady a partner every step of the way of women's progress, tells her the path to the sky, creates a beautiful future so that every woman can move forward and achieve success, but without forgetting her femininity, without violating the norms of our traditions and ideals. Meri Saheli tries to make the lives of women beautiful, to give them a new force, to help them find new paths and new confidence, today and forever.*

Aarti had been a fanatical reader of both magazines throughout her middle age, and usually read the magazines during teatime and other quiet moments of the day at home, when the blare of the television might cause a bit of sensory overload. I eventually became enlisted to go every two weeks to pick up *Vanitha,* and every month to buy *Meri Saheli* from the newsagent. Although the Indian print media market, like most print markets, has been influenced by the wide availability of the Internet, magazines have historically done well comparatively, particularly in markets where television and the Internet was not immediately available as sources of at-home news and entertainment (Chandran 2008). Notably, neither *Meri Saheli* nor *Vanitha* publish English editions, with an assumption that their readership prefers to read in vernacular languages; the Hindi edition of *Vanitha* presumes a pan-North Indian readership located primarily in the Hindi belt. Women write letters to the editor from Bhopal, Indore, Lucknow, and other large North Indian cities; they are mothers, unmarried daughters, government workers, and housewives, but primarily articulate a middle-class Hindu perspective. We might get a picture of the *"Vanitha* woman" or the *"Meri Saheli* woman" through an analysis of the stories and advertisements published in each magazine. Both *Vanitha* and *Meri Saheli* cater to a primarily married, primarily Hindu audience. Their "special issues" focus on topics like bridal and party makeup, knitting and crocheting projects, child-friendly recipes, celebrating Hindu festivals, Ayurvedic remedies for cold, flu, dull skin, and weight loss, and ideas for draping sarees for the home, functions, and the workplace. While the magazines do not specifically cater to housewives, and in fact do include articles on women in the workplace, the articles focus heavily on domestic life and women's functioning in the domestic sphere.

This focus on the domestic and the typical heterosexual Indian family does not preclude a progressive attitude towards aspects of women's lives. *Meri Saheli* and *Vanitha* also provide

progressively worded articles on queerness and homosexuality, women's sexuality, and legislation and current events related to the status of Indian women, such as legislation against domestic violence and marital rape. Both magazines contain "sexologist" columns in which women write in discussing problems with premature orgasms, their desire to "swap" partners or have a threesome, vaginal pain, sexual fantasies, and masturbation. While advice-seekers nearly always self-identify as married women ("I am a thirty-three-year-old woman who has been married for five years, and I have frequent urinary infections" etc.) the sex columns in both *Meri Saheli* and *Vanitha* are remarkably frank about the spectrum of sexual practices of Hindi-speaking Indian women. The sexual education provided by the column's doctors is especially frank, nonjudgmental, and clear in its belief that women's sexuality in all its varied expressions is neither shameful nor abnormal. The “doctor” might advise a woman to look online to find another partner for group sex, or recommend brands of lubricant to cure vaginal pain, or discuss different kinds of vibrators that could be tried to achieve orgasm. A woman who has had a pregnancy scare from premarital sex will be advised on her right to an abortion and on birth control methods, but women who transgress sexual boundaries are not castigated as being un-Indian, unwomanly, or shameful.

Neither is women’s sexual desire disallowed in the pages of the magazine; both magazines feature literature sections, tucked away in the back of the magazine, that feature erotic stories and poems, often focusing on the desires of married women for men other than their husbands, and memories of pre-marriage love affairs that inflame sexual desires within female characters. Many of these stories are ostensibly written by readers and based on their real-life fantasies and dreamings, submitted to the magazine to share with like-minded women seeking to be titillated and thrilled. Both *Meri Saheli* and *Vanitha* balance this progressive attitude towards

rights and sexuality with a cultivated series of lifestyle articles that focus on what *Meri Saheli* calls "the norms of [Indian] traditions and ideals." Columns like *"Bari Amma ki Salah"* ("Grandmother's Thoughts") in *Vanitha* and "*Dadi Maa ki Khazana"* ("Paternal Grandmother's Treasurehouse") in *Meri Saheli* focus on beauty and health tips passed down from elder women to younger female readers, in a fictive kin relationship that draws all readers into membership of a normative Hindi-speaking "family," with the female intimacy that is so apparent and ambivalent in joint family life.

What does this dichotomy reveal about the women who read magazines like *Vanitha* and *Meri Saheli?* What kind of "desiring subjects" emerge from the pages of these texts? It is easy to imagine the *Vanitha* or *Meri Saheli* woman as a woman whose status when it comes to "violating traditional norms and ideals" is somewhat ambiguous. She is a married mother who does knitting projects, prepares Ayurvedic flu tonics for her sick children, and would like to have an affair with her sexy next-door-neighbor. She is concerned about her cholesterol and the orgasm gap in her marriage. She may not work in an office or shop herself, but is familiar with the stressors—low wages, sexual harassment, maternity leave—that might affect working women, and feels empathy with her as a fellow woman "standing up for her rights." The magazine suggests that even the so-called "traditional" woman has thoughts and feelings that are not permissible in the nationalist image of Indian womanhood—her feelings, desires, and concerns exist beyond the gender concerns of Brahminical patriarchy, which sublimate women, and womanhood itself, to the nationalist project. Despite the presence of Hema Malini, a BJP-backed politician, as a mediating force who seeks to empower women *only* within the nationalist paradigm, *Vanitha* and *Meri Saheli* exist as artifacts of what Nancy Fraser might call a "counterpublic," in which women, writing and speaking to each other through erotic stories and letters that transcend the

nationalist paradigm to articulate a sense of real desire, a sense of doing-things-for-oneself, that challenge the dominant conventions of the public sphere (1990). If, as Blom Hansen (1999) has argued, the dominant public sphere in India *is* the nationalist paradigm, the even nascent transcendent desires of women's magazines cultivate the non-elite woman as not merely the cultural heart of some kind of "real India," but as an actively desiring subject, whose desires are shaped and reflected by what they see in media.

But what of *Femina?* Aarti's gentle admonishment—"*You* read *Femina"*—suggested to me that there might have been another kind of public, against whom non-elite women saw themselves reflected. I came to understand this public as a politically influential class, made up primarily of upper-caste urban dwellers, who had, in the minds of the Rathods, successfully "globalized," and whose presence in Indian public life served both as examples—and foils—to the Rathod women's integration into elite global identity. It is this group—who have been termed "Indo-Anglians"—that I turn to next.

A Closed "Caste?": "Indo-Anglians" and the Politics of Class Performance

Writing for the online magazine Scroll in February 2018, the journalist Sajith Pai suggested that an emergent social group of young Indians spelled significant changes for contemporary India and Indians' relationship to class, regional, and caste dynamics. These young people, Pai write, were affluent—in the top 1% of the population economically, were linguistically "English Firsts" who were perhaps uncomfortable speaking in their regional mother tongues, and whose tastes in food, clothing, media, religion, and romantic partners differed from those of their parents and from the wider Indian population. These "Indo-Anglians" enjoyed global English music and television, might have been raised vegetarian but

had friends who ate meat (including beef), practiced esoteric and heterodox forms of "Fabindia Hinduism" that had been reimported from the yoga studios of the bohemian West, and who tended to be left-liberal on matters of class and caste intermixing. Pai suggested that, as these young people married, they might choose partners of different castes or religious or regional backgrounds, thus troubling the strongly-held social lines of caste, communal, and regional boundaries. Pai writes, "This leads me to think of two distinct ways to look at Indo-Anglians. One is to see them as casteless, or even as an example of a post-caste community, where the traditional caste identity is subsumed under the new Indo-Anglian identity. The alternate approach, which I prefer, is to look at them as a distinct 'caste' parallel to the upper castes, with its own unique cultural norms and practices. The key criteria for caste inclusion and endogamy being advanced English language skills."

When I first started traveling in India, most of my friends and social contacts came from this "Indo-Anglian" group. They were often graduates of prestigious Indian universities--Jawaharlal Nehru University, St. Stephen's, University of Delhi, Miranda House being among them. Their parents often held elite jobs—high-level government officials or executives at multinational corporations, who had given them the best of English medium educations. Sometimes their grandparents and great-grandparents had been active in the independence movement, giving their families further legitimacy as power brokers in a postcolonial India. Their parents had raised them purposely to have English as their first language; they grew up reading JK Rowling and Dan Brown and listening to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones alongside Tagore and Lata Mangeshkar. They often studied abroad in the United Kingdom or United States before returning to India to work in government or business jobs where their coworkers came from similar backgrounds and had had similar educational and career

trajectories. I socialized with them in the elite spaces of Hauz Khas Village, Khan Market, and Shahpur Jat, areas frequented by well-heeled Delhiites and expatriates alike.

Much of the "Indo-Anglian" lifestyle I experienced was centered around localities in South Delhi. The area is both Delhi's archaeologically oldest area and its most affluent—many of my friends came from the wealthy districts of Greater Kailash, Kailash Colony, Sainik Farms, Vasant Vihar, or Defence Colony. I myself lived in Green Park, a lush locality bosting some of the highest rents in the city. South Delhiites, my friends told me, had certain preferences and mannerisms, some of which they had adopted and some of which they rejected. They made fun of the prototypical "Jor Bagh woman," who wore designer clothes, had affairs with her husband's friends, and spoke in an affected American accent, and the excess of many South Delhiites—what another friend called "fuck-you money"—was a source of consternation to my progressive friends.

Indo-Anglians had lived abroad and consumed media from the United States and the United Kingdom—streaming platforms like Amazon India and Netflix India made this much easier. They listened to English popular music from the United States, and had an appreciation for "oldies," like the Beatles, that seemed to extend to other members of this age and class demographic—it was impossible to visit a café or coffee shop in Delhi or in Jaipur without hearing Mick Jagger, Paul McCartney, Bryan Adams, or Lou Reed over the loudspeakers. They had friends of multiple castes, religions, and regional backgrounds, and supported leftist and reformist movements like Pinjra Tod, a women's liberation group that sought to improve equity in young women's education and sexual and public freedom. They were intensely resistant to the marriage market overseen by their parents; instead, they engaged in the international love market They took vacations together in the Maldives or Kerala, staying in the same hotel room,

controversial in a country where many hoteliers still refuse to give rooms to unmarried Indian couples.

My friends had terrific style and favored clothes from Fabindia, the British-owned fair-trade store that specialized in desi chic—beautifully tailored cotton hand-embroidered readymade *kurtas* and *sarees* that were decorated in traditional styles but still catered to a youthful, affluent, globalized consumer base. Indo-Anglians are so loyal to Fabindia as a brand that its very name has become a codeword for India's secular elite; along with "Khan Market gang," references to the "Fabindia crowd" by right-wing politicians suggests a youthful, secular, nominally anticaste Left. For these young people, the clothing they wore, the food they ate, the sexual relationships they engaged in, and the media they watched formed the backbone of their collective identity—which had a nascent politics to it, as BJP politicians sold the spectre of the out-of-touch member of the "Khan Market gang" who had rejected their Indian-ness and traditional values to their own "gang" who viewed the Indo-Anglians with a mix of envy and suspicion.

Pai gives two descriptions of Indo-Anglians and their place in larger Indian society—either they are emblematic of an evolving anticaste and anticommunal sensibility amongst young, affluent Indians, or they are in and of themselves a new kind of caste, with new ways of interacting amongst themselves and those outside the "caste." Pai prefers the second definition, with the price of "admission" into this "caste" being English fluency and a certain amount of financial capital. The assumption, then, is that entry into the world of the Indo-Anglians was relatively simple for members of India's aspirational middle classes, who maintained English fluency and had the money to take on the trappings of elite young Indians—or at least to perform as if they did. Yet my interlocutors, both those who would measure up as Indo-Anglians and

those who did not, maintained that the price of entry into this elite caste was considerably more difficult than Pai suggests. In those places and spaces which are governed by the Indo-Anglian elite, and in those places and spaces where Indo-Anglians might meet and mix with the aspirational middle classes and the working classes, the price of admission into this "caste," and the unspoken rules and "caste norms" of the Indo-Anglian caste are revealed to have considerably more nuance. I offer below a few examples of how these caste norms play out.

It is first necessary to understand how caste itself works within this Indo-Anglian group. The signifiers that Pai suggests are indicative of this group—a move away from vegetarianism and towards deliberate, transgressive meat-eating, contracting marriages with low-caste or non-Hindu partners, and practicing esoteric forms of religion re-imported from the West—still presupposes a *savarna* Hindu caste identity. Some of the Indo-Anglians' attributes—the consumption of English-language international media, fierce loyalty to high-end brands like Fabindia or Jaipur's own Anokhi Blockprints—suggest a class, rather than caste, boundedness; as long as one has the money to do so, one can successfully "perform" as a member of this Indo-Anglian caste/group. Yet one must remember that upward mobility in India has always been a matter of caste dynamics. Arundhati Roy, writing in her introduction of the 2014 annotated edition of B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste,* invokes the 2006 case of the Bhotmange family massacre, in which a family of Dalit farmers in rural Maharashtra were slaughtered by a local dominant-caste gang for the crime of building a cement house, securing an electricity connection, and sending their daughter to the local college. Such a slaughter, Roy suggests, is emblematic of the core problem of social reform and advancement in independent India—the tight interlocking of class mobility and caste position, and the danger that Dalits risk when engaging in the work of advancement. Ambedkar, for his part, foresaw this as the central

roadblock to the project of post-independence social reform; a people who "could receive no education" because of their caste position could articulate no kind of national solidarity, and those high castes which had benefitted from generations of caste oppression had no interest in changing (Ambedkar 2014, 43).

In discussing the caste signifiers of the Indo-Anglians, Pai claims that the lack of interest in caste amongst young Indo-Anglians could represent a change in how these kinds of caste boundaries will work in the future, but further admits that the necessary "confidence" required to enter into this "caste" stems mostly from a life lived the savarna way, in which open and public transgression, ranging from intercaste marriages to intercaste and nonvegetarian dining, is unlikely to get one thrashed or killed. "Confidence" here implies class/caste-as-performance, a kind of fake-it-till-you-make-it mentality that suggests that entry into this elite group is all in one's mindset. Yet the cultivation of that mindset requires a presupposed set of skills and experiences, beginning in one's early childhood. One must acquire knowledge of English and have the skills that one can comprehend the television shows and music—*Friends, Breaking Bad, Game of Thrones,* the Beatles and the Stones—that make up the cultural markers of the Indo-Anglian class. These cultural markers are so ingrained, so much a part of what it means to be part of the "caste," that they have become as standardized and predictable as other formers of culturally-and-caste-ingrained behaviors. A fellow anthropologist and I once sat in a high-end restaurant in Delhi's Select Citywalk Mall, a frequent haunt of upwardly-mobile-youth, where we found ourselves able to predict the entire setlist of the young guitarist and singer who had been called to provide the evening's live entertainment. Such songs include Bryan Adams' "Summer of '69," the Beatles' "Hey Jude," John Lennon's "Imagine," and the Eagles' "Hotel California." In Delhi in more recent years, this canon has expanded to more contemporary

English music, spanning a range of genres—artists like Eminem, Pitbull, Linkin Park, and Ed Sheeran are considered essential artists to know for the Indo-Anglian class. In Jaipur, high-end cafes and nightclubs typically play the older "canon" of mid-1960s classic rock—even the essential music by which Delhi's Indo-Anglians once defined their existence has become regionalized.

Self-presentation, and the cultivation and performance of good taste, are vital to entry into the circles of young Indo-Anglia. *Femina* magazine prioritizes the cultivation and expression of an individual sense of self through one's sartorial preferences; a woman's choice of saree fabric and design, jewelry, food, and makeup are all meant not to display adherence to tradition or family values, as in the pages of *Meri Saheli,* but rather individual and unique choice. This individuality is often articulated by *Femina* writers as being necessarily *against* tradition; in its 2019 bridal issue, for example, the magazine advises against choosing traditional *jhumki* and *chandbali* designs for bridal earrings, suggests trying out a "gothic-inspired" makeup look, and discusses blush-colored bridal lehengas available from the well-known bridal designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee for those brides who "don't wish to toe the line" by wearing the traditional bridal red. A woman may be entering into an arranged marriage, the magazine articles say (the same issue also includes an article on "coping" with an arranged marriage) or make any number of traditional choices around her marriage and family life, but may still express her own individuality, and claim some social and political agency, through displays of her consumption. Like the woman who reads *Meri Saheli,* the *Femina* reader continues to occupy an ambiguous space when it comes to the nationalist convention of woman as ontologically cultural center; nevertheless, her primarily concern, as articulated in the magazine, is to cultivate individuality.

Her goal is to stand apart, and her class and caste position, along with her status as someone who has learned and maintained the "language" of elite identity,

Nominally, the trappings of the Indo-Anglians should be available to any upwardly mobile young person, as Pai suggests, but they are mediated through other positionalities—class and caste, which continue to exert their influence upon social relations even in the "post-caste" realms of the urban elite. When non-elites attempt to enter those spaces, these positionalities are often crudely revealed, at sharp cost to the non-elites upon whose bodies the brunt of this pressure is exerted.

The Non-Elite Woman in Elite Spaces

What happens when the non-elite woman—the *Meri Saheli* woman versus the *Femina* woman—attempts to articulate a sense of self-expression, or makes aspirations towards joining the elite class? Non-elite young women's culture, such as that articulated by Pooja and Janaki, is predicated upon open displays of self-expression that sometimes frustrate their parents. One example of this is what was called by my interlocutors the *selfie ki rani,* the "selfie queen," the middle-class girl obsessed with Instagram who represents an emergent market in public youth culture in India. Visiting any café or mid-range restaurant in Jaipur, one immediately is confronted by groups of girls and young women, high school age up, posing for photos and selfies, some taken by oneself or some taken by an artistically minded friend, commanding *"Udhar jao! Aise karo!"* ("Go there! Do it like this!") Their clothes, attuned to the latest in Western fashion, often have a slight edge of shiny newness and unfamiliarity; the women seem slightly uncomfortable in the tight jeans and high-heeled shoes, though when the camera appears they automatically assume a pose of practiced glamour--hair tossed over one shoulder, an arm

placed artfully on the hip, a toothless smile. I saw this ritual constantly, in public places ranging from cafes and restaurants to such austere events as the Jaipur Literature Festival, where the green lawns of the Diggi Palace Hotel were taken up by a mix of India's intelligentsia and groups of local young people who had come to get "one photo only." When Sanjoy Roy, the festival's convener, commented that he was pleased to see so many young people interested in literature, the gadfly behind JLF Insider, a popular Twitter account commenting on the festival, wrote "Who wants to tell him they've mainly come for selfies and waffles?" The omnipresence of the "selfie queens" and the sometimes large amount of time and space their photo sessions take up have led some cafes and public spaces in Jaipur to ban selfies and selfie sticks entirely. Other public places have embraced India's emergent selfie culture, jostling to make lists of "Jaipur's most Instagrammable cafes" and providing manicured spots for photo ops.

While the culture of the "selfie queen" appeared everywhere I went in North India--Delhi, Jaipur, Udaipur, Amritsar--the subtleties of how young Indians interact in and represent themselves in public spaces were divided along clearly classed and gendered lines. Nowhere was this more evident than in the sharp difference between the public youth culture of Jaipur, a "second-tier" city with a reputation of conservative culture, and amongst similar Indo-Anglian youth living in Delhi, particularly in South Delhi. While the Jaipur café women wore clothing attuned to the latest Western fashions and spent a good deal of time before eating or drinking posing for photos, the girls and women who frequented posh areas of Delhi were more likely to wear Fabindia or Anokhi (hand-printed cotton kurtas worn with jeans and jutti shoes and silver jewelry), speak in English rather than Hindi or even the slangy "Hinglish," and disdain the vulgarity of the "middle classes" who "dress up" to visit youth-centered parts of the city such as Hauz Khas Village (HKV) and Connaught Place.

The elite middle class consists of an older group more settled in the upper spheres of Indian social life; these are the children of politicians, executives, and high-powered academics who have enjoyed a foreign education, worked abroad, and participate in the cosmopolitan world of global media by means of their competency in English and respected degrees. It is these people who make up the worlds of India's bourgeois intelligentsia as above the coarse self-representation facilitated by Instagram and WhatsApp, capable of higher ideas and appreciating things merely for the sake of appreciating them.

One also sees this in the demonization of middle-class young people, particularly young women, and their hamfisted attempts at achieving social media clout through self-presentation as sophisticated and globalized citizens, particularly when they "fail" to do so through improper use of aesthetics or poor English. Websites like the r/IndianPeopleFacebook subreddit are dedicated to mocking the overly sentimental, poorly-spelled, Photoshopped Facebook and Instagram posts of India's non-English-proficient middle and working classes. Most of the users on the subreddit self-identify as South Asian, although white Internet users have also seized onto the pastime of mocking specifically South Asian internet users with low English proficiency.[13] In some cases, the post featured will have no mistakes in English at all, nor be overly *senti;* the post, however, might feature a young man in new clothes with a smart haircut standing in the middle of a rural field, or a young woman posing for an Instagram photo in a salwar kameez. The joke, of course, is in the juxtaposition of the subject's class performativity—wearing jeans and a designer shirt, or heavy makeup—against the subject's rural, presumably poverty-bound location.

[13] In order to mitigate the popularity of r/IndianPeopleFacebook amongst white users seeking to mock and imitate Indian English and comment on Indian social life, the moderators of the subreddit instituted a rule that "users should refrain from posting satire/people mocking or impersonating non-Anglophone social media users…racism will not be tolerated!" Despite this rule being "stickied" (automatically posted) at the beginning of each comment thread, I observed multiple instances of mockery and imitation being engaged in by members of the group. While many posters on the subreddit identify as Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi, it is nearly impossible to verify the racial and national identities of users.

Perhaps the earliest example of this phenomenon is the uproar surrounding the 2012 Tamil-English song "Why This Kolaveri Di?" ("Girl, Why All This Rage?") recorded by the South Indian actor Dhanush. The song, known in Tamil as a "soup song" which focuses on the inner turmoil of a heartbroken young man, took on a viral life of its own in North India because of its seemingly incongruous mix of Tamil and English lyrics ("White skin-u girl-u girl-u/Girl-u heart-u black-u/Eyes-u eyes-u meet-u meet-u/My future dark"). However, more recent examples of the failed middle-class social media star focus primarily on women. I will give here the example of the Delhi-based singer Pooja Jain, better known as Dhinchak Pooja, whose 2017 viral YouTube hit "Selfie Maine Le Li Aaj" ("Today I Took a Selfie") features a photo slideshow of her posing provocatively in Western outfits in front of various Delhi landmarks, while she sings about her status as a Delhi "selfie queen" ("Today I took a selfie/I kept a tiara on my head/I'll take a selfie with my friends/We drive around in an Audi morning, noon, and night.") Others of Jain's songs are set in a glamorous world of the wealthy Delhi girl, like "Baapu Thoda De De Cash" ("Daddy, Give Me a Little Cash") and a Punjabi-language song celebrating Delhi's famously outspoken female population, "Nache Jab Kudi Dilli Di" ("When the Delhi Girl Dances").

Jain's untrained vocals and the amateurish quality of the video for "Selfie Maine Le Li Aaj" propelled her to the height of Indian viral stardom, with the video being viewed almost 20 million times before being taken down due to a copyright claim from an anonymous viewer, Kathappa Singh, whose name referenced the murderous villain of the blockbuster 2015 Telugu film *Baahubali: The Beginning.* Kathappa Singh's "murder" of Dhinchak Pooja was celebrated by Indian Twitter users, with one user heralding the removal of her videos as a sign that Narendra Modi's promised *achche din* had finally arrived. The *Times of India,* noting that Jain

had made 7 lakh (700,000) rupees in revenue from Youtube clicks, wrote that Jain's refusal to stop uploading videos while she was ahead was a sign that she "failed to realize" that she had made herself into a public spectacle being roundly mocked by Youtube and Twitter users across the country.

What is it that young non-elite women hope to achieve in their craze for publicity? As a young woman with a robust social media presence, I put this question to myself as much as I put it to Janaki, Pooja, and their friends. While Janaki preferred Facebook's chat function and the thrill of WhatsApp group gossip, Pooja was a self-described "selfie ki rani" and "Instagram *bhakt."* In fact, our bonding had been facilitated partly through the sharing of photos on our Instagram pages. My own Instagram feed reflects the life of a typical young urban American woman—outings with friends, family holidays, pictures with my partner and our cats, a few artfully posed selfies. Like many young women of my social class and position, I used Instagram as a way to project myself as living an ideal life: no matter how I might actually feel on the inside, my Instagram-self is that of a happy, healthy, and above all privileged young woman, who has everything she's ever wanted.

In turn, Pooja sought to curate, via Instagram, a life for herself that imagined alternatives beyond her actually existing circumstances. Because I had an iPhone camera I was often enlisted to help her take photos. This was a process that could, quite legitimately, last for hours. I would assist in arranging her hair, putting on her makeup, and letting her know what pose looked best as she and I traipsed around family events and Jaipur's popular tourist sites together. It would take her so long to take one photo that, by the time I got the shot, our friends or Pooja's family would often have moved on to the next site, rolling their eyes at what they saw as her vanity. After the shot had been secured, Pooja would select the perfect filter that made her face look

smoother, her lips redder, the environment around her more saturated, before posting it on her page, often with a pithy English quote on beauty, happiness, or wanderlust from people like Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe. I was surprised to see that these photos would garner hundreds of likes from followers she described as "dedicated." Looking at these users' pages, they would be almost exactly put together in the same way as Pooja's page—the same quotes, the same filters, the same carefully articulated poses. If Pooja was doing this for male attention, then she had failed, since the vast majority of her followers were other young Rajput and Rajasthani women. And, indeed, their typified behavior, that of the *selfie ki rani,* seemed more of a luxuriation in the process of crafting the selfie than the attention they received.

Alice Marwick (2015), in her study of the Instagram "micro-celebrity," has argued that, rather than the egalitarian space that many social media users presume internet fame is (think Warhol's universally accessible fifteen minutes), Instagram is a space where class is reified and represented. While anyone can get famous, those that do are the ones who most successfully reproduce the trappings of luxury—this is the "aspirational" aspect of social media, in which users present themselves as richer, more beautiful, and happier than they actually are. I might participate in this by uploading a picture of my partner and I snuggling when in reality we've just had an argument; Pooja might do this by putting on her nicest jeans and blouse before going to snap a picture at Hawa Mahal. Because of this tendency, Marwick claims, Instagram is *not* purely "documentary;" rather, it is a space of cultivating relationships predicated on one's ability to perform happiness, beauty, and luxury. For urban Indian women like Pooja, happiness, beauty, and luxury most often correspond with the trappings of Anglo-India—the English fluency, the international travel, the trappings of clothing and cosmetics.

Yet such performance is deeply precarious, and seemingly fragile in others' recognition. Passing, in this context, is something that is largely determinant by the constant performance of aspirational achievement. What happens, then, if one fails to play by the rules? If one fails to appropriately perform this aspiration properly? We have seen some examples of this failure in the case of Dhinchak Pooja the self-aggrandizing Youtube queen. Violence and threat can await women who fail to performance this class mobility. Yet this violence and threat is deeply rooted in the historical construction of Indian women as caught between modernity and ontological tradition; this tension gives way both to the construction of women in the nationalist imagination and opens avenues for women to mount a critique of this aspirational tension through imagining themselves as center to "common," non-elite publics.

Behenjis-Turned-Mod And Other Headaches

The cultural economy of mockery around working-class and lower-middle-class women's attempts at class-passing has its roots in the debate around women's empowerment in the early 1990s. Working- and middle-class women became more visible in Indian cities, as women migrated from villages and small towns to cities, got jobs in corporate and government offices, and experimented with their style, their bearing, and their outward expressions of sexuality. Such women were derided in Indian media for their sometimes-clumsy attempts at imitating their fashionable urban sisters, particularly those women who came from small towns and entered professions like modeling, television presenting, and newscasting that required the development of a certain cosmopolitan "look." One name used by the Indian media to characterize such women was *behenji-turned-mod(ern),* or *BTM. "Behenji"* ("respected sister"), a genteel way to refer to women in the rural Hindi Belt, had been levied on university campuses

beginning in the 1970s at women who presented themselves as modest and traditional; a girl might be sardonically referred to as *behenji* if she "wore salwar kameez rather than trousers, perhaps had oil in her hair, and an accent from the hinterland" (Munshi 2012, 226). In the 1990s and early 2000s, *behenji* characters on Hindi-language television and film, like that of Smriti Irani's Tulsi Virani on the soap opera *Kyunki saas bhi kabhi bahu thi* ("Because a mother-in-law too was once a daughter-in-law") and the heroines of the Sooraj Barjatya films *Hum aapke hain koun…?* ("Who am I to you?"), *Hum saath saath hain* ("We're always together"), and *Vivah* ("The marriage"), emerged as deliberate counterfigures to the importation of "sex symbols" from Western media. Yet the television/film *behenji* was no retiring flower; she dressed and acted in a traditional way but wasn't afraid of participating in female bonding and standing up against abusive husbands and cruel mothers-in-law to provide a new standard of behavior for middle-class Hindi-speaking women. Shoma Munshi (2012) has described the intense affective kinship that many middle-class women felt with *behenji* characters in the 1990s and 2000s, seeing in these women a reflection of their everyday struggles for household and erotic agency, and to engage in a kind of substitute intimacy with the women on screen, who are seen to bear witness to women's actual household struggles.[14] The comfortable familiarity of the *behenji* characters on screen, and their reflection of the "real woman's" everyday existence, is perhaps summed up best by Smriti Irani, the actress who played Tulsi Virani in *Kyunki saas bhi* and would later go on to become a union minister in the Modi government, when she described her "place" in the pantheon of Indian actresses: "The audiences don't expect me to a be a dressed-up *Gudiya*

[14] I witnessed this in Jaipur with Aarti's dedication to a reboot of *Kausatii Zindagii Kay* ("The troubles of life") which had run in its initial from 2001-2008 and had recently been rebooted with a new cast. The show focuses on a young Bengali couple, the woman from a middle-class family and the man from an upper-class family, who marry in secret and struggle to keep their relationship together in the wake of their parents' meddling. As is typical with serials produced by Ekta Kapoor, the relationship ends unhappily; the woman is married off to another man and the show ends in a double suicide. Aarti was deeply attached to the show, and especially to Prerna, the heroine, who agreed to marry another man in order to protect her first husband's family fortune.

(doll)…I am not in the industry to be a dressed-up glamour doll. Unfortunately, I am not a Bipasha Basu or a Katrina Kaif[15]…I am comfortable wearing saris and only *bahus* (daughters-in-law) get to do that."

Middle-class rural and small-town women enjoyed a host of new pleasures and luxuries beginning in the 1990s. Some of these were economic—the service industry boom of the post-liberalization marketplace offered women a whole host of new opportunities in hospitality and management industries, giving them purchasing power that they then pumped back into the Indian economy by shopping in malls, which sprung up even in small cities. Advertisements focused on individual personal freedoms in the household achieved by middle-class women; in one advertisement for birth control pills, a woman remarked "Yesterday, he (her husband) burnt breakfast. Thank God, birth control is now totally in my own hands" (Munshi 1998, 572). While advertisements of this period may have self-consciously borrowed the language of the Indian feminist movements of the 1970s to sell pressure cookers and pills, the advertisements were powerfully affective for a particular generation of middle-class housebound women (Munshi 575). I witnessed, for instance, how Aarti Rathod utilized advertisements for kitchenware and home goods to mount a critique of her husband's refusal to consider her physical needs; her frequent demands for alleviation from the heat and more time for leisure reflected not just her actual demand for these goods, but also pointed out how Narayan Singh's neglect represent a failure to appropriately care for her and the family's future wellbeing.

All this is to say that the contemporary *behenji,* though portrayed evocatively by the journalist Srijana Mitra Das in 2014 as "demure creatures…wearing trailing draperies, letting elders take the lead, eating golgappas within given deadlines" had as early as the 1970s been

[15] Two Bollywood actresses considered the quintessential glamorous sex symbols of the mid-2000s.

articulating a nascent feminist praxis, rooted in a refusal to completely accept the circumstances of many traditional family lives. Incidents of dowry murder, also known as "bride-burning," increased from 400 deaths per year in 1980 to 2800 in 1990, perhaps spurred by liberalization's increased demand for luxury goods in middle-class households (Pratap 1995). Campaigns against dowry murder provided women with organizational opportunities, while also providing insight within middle-class families into the benefits of aspects of women's liberation.

Middle-class women who entered workplaces and urban spaces in the late 1990s and early 2000s, emboldened by promises of women's empowerment that were reflected in the media they consumed, nevertheless found themselves subject to new rules and restrictions that they did not anticipate. The craze for Western imported goods meant that wearing sarees and salwar suits in offices, restaurants, and other spaces where the Indian business world materialized were inappropriate. In some cases, wearing Indian clothing made the wearer subject to restrictions on movement in highly elite spaces; a story was told to me by a friend about his paternal aunt, the daughter of a Gujarati merchant family, being refused admission to the lobby of the posh Taj Hotel in Mumbai in the mid-1990s because she was wearing a "housewifey" cotton saree in the Gujarati style. Some nightclubs, hotels, and restaurants placed restrictions on the kind of clothing patrons could wear; as late as the mid-2010s some nightclubs in Jaipur banned the wearing of *kurtas* and *chappals* on the dance floor, while posh nightclubs in Delhi would not play Hindi or Punjabi music. There were, of course, no issues with white foreigners (such as myself) wearing Indian clothing in nightclubs, and I saw some Indians wearing high-brand *chappals* in Jaipur restaurants and clubs. Such rules are heavily classed, racialized, and casted.

Feeling the need to fit in, many women, former *behenjis,* took to adopting the look of their urban sisters, buying Western clothing to wear to nightclubs and restaurants, and

developing a unique look of mixing desi and Western aesthetics. Women who practiced this adaptation, but who retained their regional accents and other class markers, were immediately derided as *behenjis-turned-mod(ern)*; that is, a rural woman who had unsuccessfully failed to "pass" as a modern girl; she might have tried, but all could immediately recognize her as an unreconstructed *behenji.* The figure of the *behenji* has proved a considerable bugbear for Indian popular culture. She is a figure of derision yet also represents a kind of authentic *desi*-ness, a representative figure of a woman who retains some element of nationalistic "tradition." This places her in opposition to the reformed, globalized "Indo-Anglian" woman, who is problematized as a woman who has lost touch with the standards of what it means to be Indian. How do these figureheads discipline and speak to each other, and how do they construct what it means to be a middle-class woman in an ambiguous India. I turn next to two pieces of media that put these women in conversation with each other, in order to understand the obligations at play for both.

West Delhi Wildcat, South Delhi Bitch: The Middle-Class Girl Online

Middle-class girls and young women, the daughters of *behenjis-turned-mod,* increasingly see themselves and their everyday lives reflected in Indian media in more nuanced ways. Films like Netflix India's *Lust Stories* and web series like Amazon India's *Made in Heaven* reflect middle-class India's social realities and anxieties, women's concerns about expressions of their sexuality and desire, and the tensions of class mobility and ever-increasing drives to consume. The historical burden this places on women and their bodily habitus has not changed much; from the 19th-century *memsahib* to the *kalaj ladki* of the 1920s to the New Woman of the Nehruvian period to the *behenji* of the 1990s, women and their modernity (or lack thereof) are still objects of concern and derision.

I focus on two video series produced by the female-oriented YouTube channel iDiva, each focusing on a different geographical part of Delhi associated with middle-class and aspirational living—South-central Delhi, particularly the districts of Jor Bagh, Sainik Farms, and Lodhi Colony, and West Delhi, particularly the districts of Rajouri Gardens, Dilshad Gardens, and Punjabi Bagh, settled by Punjabi refugees after Partition. While the West Delhi girl is portrayed as a *junglee billi,* a wildcat, whose middle-class sensibilities and aspirational strivings give way to an essentially working-class, low-caste violence, the South Delhi girl is portrayed as a *kamini* or bitch, whose material wealth has failed to civilize her or give her acceptable tastes. We might think of the West Delhi girl and the South Delhi girl, as portrayed in iDiva's videos, as two aspects of the *mem,* the bugbear of the 19th-century Hindu reformer, the working-class woman who put on the "costume" of a high-class lady by wearing the saree and petticoat, smoking cigarettes, reading novels and riding in carriages with men, and above all laughing and speaking too loudly and maintaining a vulgar countenance (Chatterjee 1989, 625). Vulgarity, rather than violence as in the case of aspirational men, becomes the central sin of the aspirational woman—further solidifying their status as objects of ridicule.

The West Delhi girl and the South Delhi girl are portrayed in the iDiva videos by the same actress, comedian Kusha Kapila, who also hosts an English-language feminist movie review series for Netflix India. As West Delhiite Aarti, "the queen of Rajouri Garden," she is motormouthed and vulgar, beginning each video with a characteristic *Ayyyy chudail* ("Hey, witch!") or *Ayyyy kamini* ("Hey, bitch!") She is identifiably Punjabi, fiercely dedicated to the goddess Maa Sherawali, a village form of Goddess Durga whose center of devotion is in eastern Punjab (Kalra and Purewal 2019, 98), and talks glowingly about her *"papa ka dry fruits ka business"* in the working-class neighborhood of Chandni Chowk that allows her family to own a

"badi badi car." She discusses buying fake designer cosmetics with her horrified "Greater Kailash-*wali"* friend, being able to eat at the high-end Delhi sushi restaurant Yum Yum Cha (but only because the manager is her cousin) and having knockoff copies of Sabyasachi blouses made by her Sakhi Aunty, who can cut a blouse *"ekdum* straight." Aarti dates Tommy, a wannabe rapper who implores her "*Nudes bhej."* With a high-pitched, witchy cackle, Aarti informs the viewer that she "went out and bought some *nude lipsticks* and selfies *bhej di."*

Although Aarti derides South Delhi girls (particularly Naina, the South Delhi character played by Kapila in the South Delhi Girls videos) as "fake" and "wannabe," throughout her stream-of-consciousness monologues about knockoff clothing and the superiority of West Delhi neighborhoods, she displays signs of "striving" to become apparently affluent in the manner displayed by her South Delhi counterparts. Every video ends with Aarti reminding her audience that *"DLF ka builder mere papa ka friend hai,"* ("The builder of DLF is my father's friend"), referring to a popular South Delhi mall frequently by upwardly mobile Delhiites. In a video dedicated to "West Delhi thoughts on Valentine's Day," she describes a trip to Café Coffee Day, an Indian-origin midrange coffee shop chain frequented by middle-class weekenders, in central Delhi: "You have to go to the Taj CCD though. In the Taj Hotel. My older sister's wedding was at the Taj Hotel—*we earn,* don't we?"

The West Delhi girl is loud, tacky, prone to fighting, and fiercely proud of her middle-class identity even as she strives for more. Her presence in upper-crust echelons of India's capital is portrayed as ironic—when she enters into high-end malls or restaurants, she is clearly out of place, unable to successfully integrate despite her indistinguishable knockoff clothes or her father's business. The humor lies in her idiosyncratic speech, her pretenses towards fame (when she performs a rap dedicated to Maa Sherawali, it is impossible not to think of Dhinchak Pooja,

on whom the character of Aarti is clearly based) and her insistence that she *is* a classy and respectable upper-middle-class woman, even thought to an upper-middle-class audience she intentionally comes off as another loudmouth city girl. Some of the skits' humor also lies in her derision of her South Delhi counterpart, whom she derides as "e*k number ki kamini"* ("the number-one bitch") for her smugness, pretentiousness, and lack of authenticity. I saw this derision reflected in the way Pooja derided the elite women she worked with as "snobs" who mistreated her because of her perceived elite failure.

The South Delhi girl played by Kapila is Naineswari, or "Naina," who lives in the wealthy district of Sainik Farms with her mother Billi (who Kapila also plays, in a series dedicated to 'South Delhi Aunties'). Unlike the West Delhi Girl videos, which are chiefly in Hindi, the South Delhi Girl videos are delivered in "Hinglish," the poppy mix of Hindi and English spoken by affluent urbanites; Kapila affects a strong upper-class accent in her delivery of her Hindi lines. Naina's world is made up solely of the neighborhoods of South Delhi and New Delhi, which she refers to as "real Delhi;" in one video she asks inquisitively of the viewer: *"Mujhe toh pata hai GK pata hai, and Panchsheel pata hai, Golf Link woh pata hai, aur toh? Kuch aur hota hai Dilli mein?"* ("I know Greater Kailash, and I know Panchsheel Park, and I know Golf Link, and what else? Is there something else in Delhi?") Naina has never been in the Delhi Metro or on the bus, claims "you've done nothing with your life" if you have not been to the upper-class shopping district of Khan Market, and decides that for the new year "I'm going to get to know myself better. And I don't have to go to Hauz Khas for that."

One might see the South Delhi Girls videos as a critique of the excess of the Indian elite classes, whose rejection of everything Indian reflects their own racial insecurities. In the South Delhi videos, Kapila performs with fellow comedians Dolly Singh and Stuti Bhattacharya, who

also portray unnamed South Delhi girls; Bhattacharya's character speaks in an artificial American accent and says things like "I don't understand this culture of going to Egg Bar and My Bar (two popular South Delhi nightclubs) and whatever bar and, like, singing karaoke and dancing to Bollywood songs. Like, can't we be a little cultured?" A running joke in the series is the linguistic difficulties between Singh's character and her maid, Sunita; Singh's character, whose Hindi is not as good as her English, must frequently think of words to explain to the non-English-speaking Sunita what it is she wants: "*Sparkling* water, Sunita. *Chamakila paani.* Thank *yew."* Thus we might think of Kapila, Singh, and Bhattacharya's characters as examples of good "Indo-Anglians." While certainly mocking the vicissitudes of upper-class urban Indian life, the videos also presuppose a body of knowledge held by the viewer, who themselves is presumed to be a native English speaker familiar with the brands, people, and places the characters speak of; restaurants like Yum Yum Cha, My Bar, and Big Chill Cakery, institutions of upper-class Delhi life, feature frequently in the characters' dialogue and are never explained, while sections spoken in English are not accompanied by a Hindi translation.

The West Delhi and South Delhi characters played by Kusha Kapila, though different in class, possibly caste, and regional location, each reflect a deep concern about the contemporary vulgarity of young women and the impact of the entrance of these young women into the public sphere. In some ways, this is nothing new for India at periods of change and reform; as recorded by Partha Chatterjee, reformers in 19th-century Bengal were deeply concerned at how young women, liberated from domestic duties through the establishment of a wealthy *babu* class in urban Calcutta, found themselves turning to novel-reading, shopping, card-playing, and public travel in order to stimulate their intellectual interests and to take advantage of their new leisure time. Women, particularly working-class women, who took up these hobbies and interests were

derided as *memsahebs,* national traitors who were self-consciously attempting to imitate European women and thus make themselves look ridiculous even as they betrayed a nascent sense of Indian nationalism. Chatterjee quotes the Bengali reformist Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, writing on the condition of the bureaucratic-class family, in describing the presumed social result of such women: "The men learn English and become *sahibs*. The women do not learn English but nevertheless try to become *bibis.* In households which manage an income of a hundred rupees, the women no longer cook, sweep, or make the bed: everything is done by servants and maids; [the women] only read books, sew carpets, and play cards. What is the result? The house and furniture get untidy, the meals poor, the health of every member of the family is ruined…they die early" (Chatterjee 1989, 625).

Elite performance, then, as it emerged in colonial India, was predicated on the suppression of unruly desires on behalf of the state. The disciplinary procedure of the colony was to shape women into facilitators of household management without any expression for an open or pleasurable public life. Much of the disciplinary regime that controlled women's excess was a direct borrow from the inculcated cultural performances of English women in India, who had become the foci of the heterosexual normative imperial family on the fringes of empire. Placed in the colonies solely to prevent the illicit interracial liaisons that had marked the early days of British presence in India, the English woman's presumed soberness of mind and firmness in authority were considered key to spreading the power of imperial authority to the little empire of the home. English wives in India were instructed in ladies' manuals to refrain from drinking alcohol and eating red meat, to take exercise through walks rather than going to balls or dances, and to "exercise calm judgment" in dealing with difficulties that came with life on the imperial frontier (Vimala 2013, 288, 290). The ladies' manuals suggest that, at moments when norms in

the structure and role of the family were rapidly changing, it was the role of women to forgo fun, pleasure, or self-exploration in order to preserve the structures of the family and the state, whether those be in the confines of the imperial apparatus or the contemporary neoliberal state. Vulgarity in dress, mannerism, or relationships was threatening not only to the health and hygiene of the family and the private space of the home, but more broadly to the health and hygiene of the nation.

In the post-liberalization period, new forms of leisure became available to elite and non-elite women, but non-elite women whose experiences of globalization were more ambiguous have struggled to gain a foothold in the contemporary public sphere. How, then, can non-elite women achieve their goals of achieving and maintaining a public persona? Hindu nationalism, which has adapted the public sphere for its own communicative ends, offers a way for non-elite women to weaponize their non-eliteness through its preoccupation with commonality—the so-called *aam aadmi* (common man)—indigeneity (Truschke 2022), and rejection of a stock "globalized subject." Non-elite women utilize Hindu nationalism in its contemporary valence as a way to create and maintain a public persona that elides the anxiety of gender by reframing disappointing experiences and ugly feelings as evidence of an anti-Hindu, anti-common man force, and allowing women to maintain self-actualization through the pleasure they feel at the defeat of these forces. I turn to this pleasure in my next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

"DOING" GENDER IN PURSUIT OF VIOLENCE: RAGE, PLEASURE, AND POLITICS

Pooja and I sat opposite each other in the Chai Wai teahouse, a favorite meeting spot of hers and a place where she and I often went to do timepass. Although the Chai Wai overlooked the Rajasthan Vidhan Sabha (state legislature) building and was situated amongst some of the most expensive real estate in Jaipur, the café was done up to look like a rural Rajasthani *tapri,* or tea stall, with thatched overhangings above the doorways, low rope chairs (I shifted a little uncomfortably) and hand-woven textiles covered the floors and walls. A modest gift shop in the lobby sold cotton sarees and handmade earrings, and on the stereo the artist Mame Khan sang a cover, arranged by the Bollywood composer Amit Trivedi, of the Rajasthani folk song "Chaudhry."

O Chaudhry, you make my heart pound!

You are the moon and I am the moonlight.

I have tied happiness into my dupatta

and brought it along with me,

so won't you come and dance?

Pooja hummed along with the music. The environment was overwhelmingly feminine; on one side of us a boisterous kitty party burst into peals of laughter, while on the other side two young, well-dressed mothers gently balanced their toddlers on their hips as they sipped tea and chatted.

Pooja and I drank tooth-achingly sweet glasses of peach-flavored iced tea and picked at a plate of mediocre, overpriced bhelpuri. I was leaving for Delhi soon, and she was describing a trip that she and Janaki had made as preteens, with Aarti, to Rashtrapati Bhavan, the presidential

mansion, when Pratibha Patil was president of India. Aarti was a relative of Patil's husband, and the family had been invited to stroll the grounds and stay overnight. Pooja and Janaki had marveled at the mansion's wide marble passages, its neat Mughal garden, and the opulent painted ceiling of Ashoka Hall, where the Viceroy and Vicereine had once received guests. I had heard the story of Aarti and the children's trip to Delhi several times before from other members of the family, but this was the first time I had heard about the access that the family had to the private areas of the mansion, and the details of their relationship with the President's family. I understood, for the first time, the networks of wealth, influence, and power in which the Rathods operated, even as their day-to-day conversations focused on their striving and their lack.

As we chatted about their experience, Pooja's phone buzzed—it was a WhatsApp message from her boss at her internship, a senior judge who had once presided at the high court at Jodhpur. She read it over and sighed. "Sir is very nice to me," she said, "and he understands the problems I have at work with some of the other students. He always tells me, 'Miss Rathod, don't let them get to you. You'll be a fine lawyer someday." This was in reference to her ongoing struggles with English, and the sense of inferiority she felt amongst her coworkers, many of whom had been educated outside of Rajasthan. "It feels good that he is so considerate of me," she said, "given how everyone else treats me. I won't even send a WhatsApp message in English to my seniors as I fear they'll make fun of me. They're all very rich. Successful." She picked at a piece of red onion. "I'm simply a regular middle-class type person, from a regular type middle-class family. And there's no assistance for common people like us. It's not like this kind of thing, like the Muslims have, or the Biharis, where they can pull each other up."

"So the people you work with are Bihari?"

"What? No." Pooja helped herself to more bhelpuri. "What I'm saying is, everything I do, I have to do it myself. *We* have to do it ourselves, in our own ways. There's no reservation for a poor man who is high-caste in this country. The Congress, these Nehrus, these politicians…they are so corrupt, they will only help themselves, and they help only Muslims, or these Bihari people. This is why I like Modi, why we all like Modi, because he is the Prime Minister of everyone, not just Muslims. He himself has come from such a normal type, poor background."

The juxtaposition of actually existing wealth and power alongside rhetoric of disenfranchisement was something that constantly occupied the conversations of the Rathods. It was true that the family and the Jaipur elites they mixed with did not live as conspicuously as the Delhi rich; they did not jet off regularly to "foreign," purchase or consume foreign goods with regularity, or rub elbows with India's political elites. Still, they lived comfortable lives, and were able to participate in India's middle-class consumer culture, with plenty of disposable income for trips to the movies and cafes, new clothes and cosmetics, and dinners out—enough so that this sometimes led to paradoxical struggles with their finances. It was therefore interesting to me that Pooja, in speaking about herself and her family, claimed kinship with the "common man" and a "normal type, poor background," associating them not with India's emergent affluent middle classes, but with the lower-middle and working classes, who have access neither to the tools of economic advancement nor the tools of political self-representation. She, too, defined India's nebulous figure of the *aam aadmi,* or "common man," by terms of what he is not. Right-wing Hindu women's identification with the figure of the "common man," and the complex relationship between "doing" the work of gender, caste, and class and "doing" the work of right-wing violence, has implications for an understanding of how women understand the place of gender in their support of and engagement in upper-caste Hindu nationalist violence.

I discuss several events that demonstrate how this understanding is articulated and deployed in service to political majoritarianism and right-wing violence. I first discuss the development of a specifically upper-caste upwardly mobile political anger, stemming from upper-caste responses to the Mandal Commission recommendations of the 1980s and the reorganization of Indian political and social life after liberalization. Utilizing the work of Andrea Dworkin and Saba Mahmood, I argue that right-wing women enter into this political environment in a state of hyper-awareness and compromise. Against readings that assume that right-wing identity in women is a sign of false consciousness or duplicity, I propose that women strategically deploy and reject gendered experience both to attain power in the household and mount critiques of normative sociopolitical forces, doing a politics I term "Hindutva feminism." Strategic rejection of femininity as a handicap to political participation is evident both in women's own self-effacement of a specifically female identity and in their framing of Narendra Modi, as the ideal celibate and unmarried *pracharak* (party worker), as a foil to the overly feminized Rahul Gandhi, whose attachment to powerful women generates discourse on Gandhi as an emasculated figure who cannot occupy a public position of leadership.

I then analyze how my respondents utilized narratives of this political anger in reaction to contemporary flashpoints such as the revocation of Article 370 governing special status for Kashmir, ongoing anti-government protests in Delhi at the beginning of 2020, and reactions to the COVID-19 lockdown. Reactions to these events, while spurred from feelings of anger and anxiety, also included elements of pleasure at the perceived reorganization of events in favor of upper-caste Hindus. This pleasure, or *mazaa,* is what spurs on further support for continued right-wing violence, and makes permissible the enactment of horrific acts of cruelty in the name of the mass Hindu public, male and female alike.

Where is the Right-Wing Woman? Articulating The Political Placement of *Hindutva* Women

When the Rathod women and their friends discussed their political consciousness, they rarely spoke of themselves as specifically gendered members of the Indian middle class. Rather than identifying as middle-class *women,* they were more likely to speak in terms of the *aam aadmi,* the so-called "common man" who stands as a silent, disenfranchised witness to the vulgarities and excesses of Indian cultural and political life. While the figure of the *aam aadmi* has existed since the Nehruvian period,[16] he has taken on a new life as an emblematic figure of both the Indian working class and the aspirational savarna middle classes, who adopted the figure as their own following the political reorganization of North India during the Indira Gandhi years, as Ayesha Jalal (1995) has described. The Indian National Congress under Gandhi solidified its political power through the selective support of minority candidates and the mass organization of religious minorities, Adivasis, and Dalits. This mass mobilization of the political power of the marginalized, along with *license raj* policies that further weakened private enterprise in the 1970s, empowered the poorest sectors of Indian society while enraging the traditional business and service castes and the middle-to-upper-middle-classes, who relied on private business and trade to support their local economies.

The legacy of these policies was a swathe of the population who were deeply convinced of the government's corruption and were further convinced that some groups had been able to leverage *license raj* and electoral organizing for their own benefit. I often heard references to Muslims and Dalits being "appeased" by Congress and other left-leaning politicians in order to

[16] See, for example, the appearance of the cartoonist RK Laxman's "Common Man" figure in the *Times of India* of the 1950s. Appearing as a dhoti-clad middle-class clerk, the Common Man saw all but never spoke, stumbling towards modernization against his own will, and cast his eye towards the excesses of the political classes.

preserve their voting blocs and to prevent the natural violence that Muslims and Dalits were said to bring. Amidst the Mandal Commission riots against university and civil service reservation in the early 1990s, young upper-caste men articulated a sense of disenfranchisement that echoes in the rhetoric of young upper-caste people in India today (Mayaram 1993, 2526). Pooja's assertion that there is "no reservation for a high-caste man who is poor," despite the swelling of social and political privilege that swirled around the lives of families like the Rathods, reflects the Mandal-era sense of minority appeasement that animated young men from Laxmi Gardens, when Pooja and Janaki had been young children, to pour into the Muslim *bastis* that make up Jaipur's Walled City, chanting the threatening slogan *Musalman ke do sthan—Pakistan ya qabristan* ("The Muslims have two places—Pakistan or the graveyard") (Mayaram 2529).

It is from this heady mix of political violence and rage that right-wing women in India create and define their roles. When women first entered into public roles in the formalized Hindu nationalist movement of the 1990s, there were relatively few spaces for married women; while they may have supported the movement financially or through labor; during the 1985 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat (and later on during the 2007 riots), women contributed to the strategy of riots in ways such as collecting donations or building weapons, they did not serve in public-facing roles. The most prominent female figureheads of the era were either ascetics, such as the female firebrands Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara, or royal widows like Vijayaraje Scindia. Free of the trappings of reproductive labor and the household, ascetic women and wealthy high-status widows were able to take on public positions without the dichotomous identity of wife or mother, whose role, in the nationalist framework, was to preserve cultural specificity in the realm of the domestic, rather than participate in the heady, male-dominated world public life (Chatterjee 1988). In the 1990s and 2000s, as militant organizing continued amongst Hindu

nationalists around the Babri Masjid controversy, some non-elite women found access to public life through membership in women's auxiliary organizations affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Shiv Sena, and Bajrang Dal. While the numbers of women affiliated with these organizations are comparatively small,[17] they have received outsized attention in the scholarly literature on right-wing women in India (see Mazumdar 1995, Bachetta 1996, 2004, Menon 2005, 2010, Bedi 2017). While these women can and did participate in incidents of extreme violence, they were not the only right-wing women whose political consciousness emerged in the post-Mandal, post-Babri Masjid years. Women whose familial, social, and caste ties did not lead them into militancy nevertheless came to define themselves as participants in the right-wing political project, often ambiguously as they teased out the tensions inherent in such roles, but who nevertheless drew meaning from the Hindu right's prescriptions for married women and daughters.

While paramilitary women may look to the fiery goddesses Durga and Kali as their role model, the women who make up the rank-and-file of the everyday Indian right may instead seek the *aam aadmi,* in all his gendered power, as a role model. This is not to say that so-called "common" women do not utilize their gender to operate in the political space. Rather, the gender identity of right-wing women vis-à-vis their rage and sense of disenfranchisement blends the specific experience of womanhood in the urban upper castes with larger political rhetorics of middle-class disenfranchisment and the following will to violence. Right-wing women in India serve to trouble the illiberal-liberal paradigm on women's political consciousness; their Hindutva

[17] About 35,000 women are members of the Durga Vahini, considered to be the most militant of the women's Hindutva organizations (Jain 2019). Estimates of numbers of women affiliated with the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti range from 100,000-1 million (Sarkar 2007).

feminism produces subjects who neither subscribe to Western liberal feminism or the demands for submission that Hindu nationalism requires for married women and unmarried daughters.

Literature on nonmilitant right-wing women in the West has largely been the provenance of second-wave feminists like Andrea Dworkin (1978), who conceived of the right-wing woman as a woman who has recognized the shelter of the normative heterosexual marriage and the normative feminine role as something like a protection racket; the right-wing woman solidifies a glorified position through sexual sublimation; "she conforms," Dworkin writes, "in order to be as safe as she can be" (14). Thus, right-wing women, even as they chafe against the violent and unfulfilling roles in which they are placed, at the same time desire to preserve those roles to safeguard their own physical and psychological safety. The legalization of abortion, same-sex marriage, and the renegotiation of gender roles within the household signified the potential for a new kind of violence—violence from which women had no forms of social protection, however small. Dworkin sums up this tendency in an evocative passage:

> The woman, in defending the ideologies of men who rise by climbing over her prone body in military formation, will not publicly mourn the loss of what those men have taken from her: she will not scream out as their heels dig into her flesh because to do so would mean the end of all meaning itself; all the ideals that motivated her to deny herself would be indelibly stained with blood that she would have to acknowledge, at last, as her own. So the woman hangs on, not with the delicacy of a clinging vine, but with a tenacity incredible in its intensity, to the very persons, institutions, and values that demean her, degrade her, glorify her powerlessness, insist upon constraining and paralyzing the most honest expressions of her will and being (1978; 17).

Dworkin, of course, was addressing the American women's movement of the 1970s, which was ideologically mixed and was attempting to recover right-wing women to the cause as a form of feminist praxis. Nevertheless, the sharp understanding of the trade-offs of feminine life that is the hallmark of Dworkin's characterization of right-wing women was evident in the experiences of the Rathod women. Despite sharing much of the same politics, Aarti was

disdainful of high-profile ascetic women, like Pooja Shakun Pandey, a leader of the Hindu Mahasabha who shot at an image of Gandhi on Gandhi Jayanti in 2019. "What a crazy woman," Aarti had said at the time, shaking her head in disdain. "To do such a thing in public." She also disapproved of Pooja's boisterous support of Modi, and her loud proclamations of his dominance and her willingness to get into political arguments with men; both she and Divya would often silence Pooja with an eyeroll and a tight *"Chup kar!"* ("Shut up!") A tension existed between public-facing women (and those with aspirations towards public life, like Pooja) and women who did not hold public roles, who seemed to bristle at the renegotiation, however small, in the world of the domestic that afforded them safety as high-caste mothers and wives.

This did not mean that non-public women who did not desire to live public lives did not have a political praxis. Indeed, their dedication to upholding caste identity and caste hierarchy in their social worlds, as well as their understandings of their positions as women who "did politics" in a way that did not fit in with liberal notions of what it means to be a political person. In this, I follow Saba Mahmood's contention that many everyday experiences of conservative women "speak back to…the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and do not uphold them, and so on" (2011, 5). The Rathod women's willingness to uphold social norms that were sometimes chafing to them was initially deeply difficult for me to understand. With the exception of Pooja, no woman in the Rathod household or in their extended network of female relatives and friends ever expressed to me a desire to have a different outcome in the trajectories of their lives and their places within their sociopolitical networks—even as they mounted critiques of the social and political environments in which they moved, something like a liberal spirit of resistance was not

usually present. Initially, this was difficult for me to parse. Women who frequently and passionately named problems related to their own social lives and their own intimate lives nevertheless upheld and participated in systems that reified quotidian social conditions, and indeed upheld them as ideal.

Drawing on Butler's understanding of performative gender, Mahmood further characterizes norms as performative; "not only consolidated and/or subverted…but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" (Ibid., 22). I came to think of the norms of the Rathod women's lives as making up a kind of performance of particular moralized acts (Ibid., 26) that serve to constitute their political habitus; this political habitus was mutable according to women's self-perception. The Rathod women's habitus of the Hindutva married woman reflects the mutable position of the Hindutva married woman as a trope—modernizing/modernized and traditional, individually liberated yet a symbol of cultural and caste cohesion, changeable and yet rooted in ontological philosophy.

I would like to give some examples of how this way of "doing" gender articulated itself in several flashpoint events in Indian social and political life. In each case, women could either take on a gendered identity as a form of political assertion or instead integrate into a larger body of the "common man," thus presenting a Hindutva femininity in a different way. In the case of some events—such as the abrogation of Article 370 for Kashmir in 2019, the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, and the anti-CAA/NRC protests of early 2020—this "doing" of gender paved the way for the legitimation of violence, performed both in women's names and on the bodies of women whose brutalization was key to the performance of and preservation of Hindutva femininity. It is important to remember that the self-development of right-wing women is paid for in the blood of women and men both. Dworkin writes that it is against the bodies of

Jewish and queer women that American right-wing women wage their wars; in the same turn, Hindu nationalist women define themselves and their ability to preserve their special status against the bodies of Muslims, particularly Kashmiri Muslims, and Dalit women and men. This is the outcome of these gendered struggles, and even as Hindutva women puzzle out their selfhood, these selfhoods are created amidst ongoing cruelty and violence.

The Pleasure is the Point: Gender, Politics, and Right-Wing Violence

My contemporary respondents did not always articulate a strong antigovernment position. In the case of demonetization, for example, which was blamed for an increase in farmer suicides and caused mass distress and inconvenience to workers in both rural and urban areas, all my interlocutors were prepared to agree that the government's actions could have been thought out better. Yet, even as they acknowledged the personal and public strain demonetization had placed on them, their families, and their communities, I never heard anyone outright condemn the actions of the government. One man, who came from a rural area near the border with Madhya Pradesh, had admitted that "demonetization made things very difficult for the farmer, the working man" but them corrected himself by saying, "It was still a good idea…the government should take bold decisions like this." "At least he did *something,"* Pooja said, exhausted at what she felt was my unfair line of questioning. While they felt that there was a strong history of the Indian state generally "forgetting" about the middle classes, they never cited the Modi government as an example of a government that forgets. Rather, the Modi government was a government that *remembered,* and considered the affairs and needs of the "common man" when proposing and implementing government schemes. Modi was not a petty tyrant in line with

Indira Gandhi or her sons Sanjay and Rajiv, but rather a harbinger of change whose policies were being frustrated by sluggish, corrupt state government officials who sought to line their own pockets, or court electoral blocs like those of Muslims and Scheduled Castes, rather than implement social policies to benefit the deserving majority of Indians. Many utilized the language of mass workers' and anti-caste movements to discuss their anger at the national situation, utilizing words like *bhrashtachar* (corruption) and *atyachar* (oppression) to discuss their own individual relationships to the state.

Modi's relationship with the opposition (a group that was discursively made up of Congress, Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party, Aam Aadmi Party, and Communist politicians and workers, Muslim and "secular" Bollywood stars, university students and intellectuals, and wealthy "secularists") was characterized as a *sangharsh,* a struggle, or an *andolan,* a movement. My interlocutors saw a connection between Modi's political *sangharsh* and their own *sangharsh* of forgottenness and alienation, particularly in their relationship with the same urban elites that were described by Modi's enforcer Amit Shah as the *tukde-tukde gang* ("the breaking-up gang"). Pooja, for example, imagined a metaphorical relationship between her own family and career struggles and what was perceived to be Modi's "political" struggles, which could be characterized as any form of verbalized legal or political opposition to the polices of the BJP. *"Unko karne do"* ("Let him try") was a common refrain, as if to ask—what is the worst that could happen?

Despite their own complex relationships with the state and with perceived state power, they placed hope in Modi that he would bring about a common man's sensibility to the proceedings of national politics. My interlocutors' hagiography of Modi focused primarily on his history as the son of a working-class Other Backwards Class family, his adventures as a young

pracharak (organizer) working for the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, his decision to take *sanyaas* (a vow of celibacy) and break off his adolescent marriage to a girl from his natal village, and his alleged heroics during the period of Emergency in the 1970s, when he and other RSS workers went into hiding, frequently staying in safe houses and traveling in disguise. Modi is *akela,* alone, in multiple senses of that word.

Unencumbered by the burdens of family, the weight of political lineage, and without caste and religious connections that are perceived to have brought other powerful populist politicians like Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati to power, Narendra Modi is a blank slate onto which the presumed *akelapan* (alone-ness) of the abandoned middle classes and middle-high castes can be projected. Because of his identity as a blank loner, Modi is also presumed to have arrived to his political height without the assistance of corruption; because he is no one's man, he conducts his affairs without the input or demands of the typical networks of bureaucratic authority and party higher-ups who dominate political life in India. These networks are made up of anyone from party authorities to rank-and-file bureaucrats to family and caste fellows; it is these networks, my interlocutors argued, that denied them access to the political process and ultimately to full participation in public life.

This is in sharp contrast to Modi's perpetual opponent, the youthful Rahul Gandhi, a great-grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru, grandson of Indira Gandhi, and son of assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Gandhi served as general secretary of the Indian National Congress from 2007-2013 under the leadership of his mother, the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, the party's current president. My interlocutors referred to him derisively by the nicknames *Chhote Shahzada* ("little prince") and *Pappu,* a children's nickname implying that he was yet a child himself, perpetually under the heel of his domineering mother. Unlike Modi, his singleness has been framed as

evidence not of his masculinity, but of his effeminacy; it is not uncommon to hear jokes about his sexuality, even from other politicians[18] On the campaign trail, Modi frequently referred to him as *Pappu,* Rahul *baba* ("big man Rahul," said a little sardonically) and as *Naamdaar* ("dynast"), implying that all Gandhi had to bank on politically was his name. Personally uncharismatic, with a tendency for giving lackluster speeches that contain none of the political fire of his father, grandmother, and great-grandfather, Gandhi represented the nadir of "family politics" in India. Pooja's father Dev Pratap would sometimes pull a childish, crying face in imitation of Gandhi, whining *"Mummy main PM ban chahta hoon, Mummy main PM ban chahta hoon!"* ("Mummy, I want to be Prime Minister!") Although Gandhi was at the time in his late forties, and had served in the Congress Party in some capacity since 2004, the Rathods—and much of the Indian media and the political scene—saw him as the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty's failure-to-launch child, Mummy's special boy being propped up by a wheezing, tubercular political network on its very last legs.

Gandhi was also seen to be perpetually under the command of stronger women. He was thought to be constantly manipulated by his mother Sonia and his more charismatic sister Priyanka, who was beloved amongst the Congress rank-and-file in a way that Rahul was not, as well as the specter of his grandmother Indira, whose presence hung over much of the BJP's rhetoric about Rahul Gandhi's lack of personal success and his family's presumed tendency

[18] The nickname may also stem from a popular song of 2008, *"Pappu Can't Dance,"* in which the titular Pappu has all the attributes of a young man-about-town—looks, money, a good education—but finds himself perpetually unable to achieve with women because of his awkward physiognomy. Like Modi, Gandhi is unmarried, and has never been so—rare for a man in his late forties in India. Rumors of supposed homosexuality are sometimes connected to him—for instance, Hindu Mahasabha leader Swami Chakrapani claimed in early 2020 that Gandhi had had an affair with fellow INC MP Jyotiraditya Scindia.

towards totalitarian authority.[19] Modi had no such entanglements, and had detached himself from women and their demands so effectively that he did not even pay a pension to the wife to whom he was still married and who he had not seen in forty years. If Gandhi was the henpecked mama's boy, subject to a monstrous regiment of women, Modi was a masculine hero, supported by a brotherhood-like cadre of BJP workers and RSS pracharaks. If Gandhi was so noxious a figure that even he, one of India's most eligible bachelors, could not get a woman to go near him, Modi had given up the easily-accessible joys and pleasures of being a householder in the service of the nation. Modi had gone head-to-head with Gandhi's powerful, almost mannish, *dadiji* Indira; Gandhi couldn't even manage to get reporters to turn up to a press conference.

Rahul Gandhi's alleged capitulation to the whims of women was no different from what my interlocutors saw as a general history of Congress' capitulation to special interests, particularly around caste. My interlocutors saw Modi as one of their own in his lack of attention to this form of political organizing, despite the vast differences between them in caste and class origin. The Rathods' disregard of Modi's caste as a factor in their political decisionmaking does not mean that caste did not matter to them. Indeed, it mattered constantly; the family was as a whole caste-conscious beyond just their attachments to Rajput aesthetics. they were relentless enforcers of caste hierarchy (although they did not like it when a Brahmin guest refused to eat food they had prepared). When a school friend of Pooja and Sukhi's visited with his mother, they were asked to sit on the floor and drink from separate utensils, due to their status as Sains (barber caste). Aarti in particular had an encyclopedic knowledge of the castes of almost every major

[19] Equally prevalent was a widely-circulated conspiracy theory that Indira Gandhi's husband Feroze, who was born into a Parsi family, was not Parsi at all but instead a crypto-Muslim, intentionally married into the Nehru family via a conspiracy between Feroze himself and Pakistani interests. "His name was Feroze Jahangir. This is a Muslim name," it was explained to me plainly. One interlocutor told me that she had met a man who had insisted that not a *single* Prime Minister from the Indian National Congress was actually Indian. "They were all Pakistani spies," she told me the man claimed.

popular figure in Rajasthan, with accompanying dissertations on their caste-designated behaviors. Yadavs were schemers, Gurjars were trashy—Jains, including their near neighbors who made comments about the smell coming from the Rathods' kitchen when they cooked eggs and meat—were snobs. Despite this almost constant discourse of caste, Modi's caste was essentially never discussed. This was the case with many of Modi's fans I knew—unlike other politicians, his behaviors were never attributed to his status as a Ghanch (oil-puller caste). Although he is classified as Other Backward Class, I rarely heard his caste mentioned in the same derogatory way that my interlocutors spoke about Dalit and other OBC politicians with whom they were not politically aligned.

Caste has always been a highly visible shadow over Indian politics; Modi has deliberately downplayed his own attachments to caste except through a rhetoric of class position (that he had sold tea on railway platforms as a child, a way to distinguish his own humble, common-man origins from the dynastic power of the Nehru-Gandhis). Hindu nationalist rhetoric, although founded on the foundational principle of Brahminical patriarchy, has enacted a deliberate strategy of rejecting older forms of caste politics in favor of reifying Hindus as a central bloc, with Muslims as their adversaries. Rather than a politics of mobilization around caste-fellows—for example, the way the powerful Yadav family consolidated power in Uttar Pradesh in the 1980s by leveraging new forms of caste empowerment made possible by the electoral strategies of the Indian National Congress—Hindu nationalist politicians and the BJP reframed the political battle as one that needed to be fought by Hindus writ large, with attention to caste—at least in the political realm—sublimated to this pan-Hindu identity. For beleaguered upper-caste conservatives in the Hindi belt who resented the kind of caste-based political consolidation that the Yadav family and others had achieved, this was a refreshing reframe, and they found a fellow

traveler in Modi, who rejected caste-based forms of organizing in favor of the nostalgia for the days of the "common man." The attitude that many Modi supporters took towards Modi's caste, and divisive caste politics in general, is perhaps best summed up by the spontaneous uttering of a young Yadav man from Bihar at a BJP rally in 2019: "*Bhaiya jaat-paat bahut dekh liye, ab desh aur dharam dekhna hai"* ("Brother, I've had enough of caste politics, and now it's time to focus on country and religion") (Raj 2022).

Although politicians like Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati, who were invoked by my interlocutors as examples of the outcome of caste capitulation, were not Congress politicians, it seemed to be understood that Congress' policies in the years following independence created the conditions for their rise. Ayesha Jalal has written about how the Congress Party, in the 1960s and 1970s, solidified its political authority with an appeal to majoritarian voting blocs made up of religious minorities and middle-low caste groups. Central to this strategy was a series of distributive economic policies, among them the revocation of privy purses from former royal families in 1971. As described in Chapter 2, the breakup of the former princely states of Rajputana was culturally and socially devastating to many high-income high-level Rajputs, who had enjoyed a level of caste respect tied to their allegiance to the princely families. I met several people in Jaipur who had strong memories of life in the princely state, or who had inherited family memories of the princely state, and drew a connection between this act of the Congress and their contemporary rage and subsequent support of Modi. I give below just one example.

Prem, the son of Aarti's second cousin, was an affable, sweet-natured young man in his early twenties from the city of Pushkar in central Rajasthan. He went to engineering college in Jaipur and stayed with the Rathods during the 2018-19 school year. Prem self-described as a Modi *bhakt* (devotee), and was so devoted to the BJP and the cause of Hindu nationalism that, he

told me while laughing, he had nearly failed twelfth standard by refusing to speak or read books in English. Only a slap from his father cured his Hindicentrism. He frequently, to the exhaustion of the rest of his household, went on long vituperative rants about the various crimes of the Indian National Congress and the Gandhi-Nehru family. Chief amongst his complaints was the Congress government's decision to revoke the privy purses of the princely states in 1971, and the jailing of Gayatri Devi, the last queen of the princely state of Jaipur, during the Emergency in 1975. When she had stood for the Lok Sabha as a member of the Jana Sangh Party (a precursor to the modern BJP) in 1967, she had won with 99% of the vote, the largest margin in history for an Indian politician. Prem was absolutely convinced that her imprisonment was an example of the Gandhi-Nehru family, and the Congress Party as a whole, overstepping their bounds into extrademocratic meddling that subverted the will of a neglected, but politically astute, underclass.

Gayatri Devi herself, who has been dead since 2009 but is still lovingly referred to as *Rajmata* ("queen mother") by Jaipur's Rajputs, is beloved, well-known internationally for her genteel demeanor and her fashion sense. Born in 1919 into the royal family of Cooch Behar in Bengal, she was a descendant of the powerful Maratha empire through her mother, who was a princess of the state of Baroda. The Marathas, in their role as the bugbears of the Mughal empire, have powerful associations for many Hindu nationalists, and Maratha queens and princesses are often set up as role models with Hindu nationalist women (see Menon 2012). When Gayatri Devi became the third wife of Maharaja Man Singh II of Jaipur in 1940, she quickly attained an international following for her style and genteel demeanor. She entertained Jackie Kennedy on the polo grounds in Jaipur, was named one of the world's most beautiful women in *Vogue* magazine, and was photographed by Cecil Beaton. Her effortless chiffon sarees and strands of

pearls were a defining look of the post-independence period: modern, forward-thinking, but still identifiably Indian. She in fact appeared to be one of the few women who was able to pull off the dichotomous position that many women found themselves in under the conditions of nationalistic reformation: she integrated a "modern" self, that smoked cigarettes, rode horses, and stood for Parliament, with the refined gentility of a Rajput noblewoman, although she herself was only a Rajput by marriage, not by birth. She continues to be an emblematic symbol of the glamour and power of the Rajput royals, and her visage graces many tourist sites associated with the erstwhile royal family throughout Jaipur. Her autobiography, *A Princess Remembers,* is hawked on every street corner in the city in various languages.

Globally, Gayatri Devi's political career was secondary to her status as a style icon, but her role in national politics is as important as her role as a Rajput queen to Hindu nationalist Jaipurites. She initially stood for Parliament in 1962 on the Swatantra Party opposition ticket, and soon emerged as the "Iron Lady" of the opposition to the rule of Indira Gandhi throughout the 1970s—a feminine, glamorous counterpart of the dogged mannishness of the Prime Minister. In 1975, not long after the declaration of Emergency by Gandhi's government, Gayatri Devi was arrested on charges of tax fraud and spent six months in Delhi's notorious Tihar Jail. The jailing ended Gayatri Devi's time in national politics, but made her a martyr for the anti-Congress cause, a suffering queen dowager, widow, and mother imprisoned by a power-hungry harpy. The satirist Khushwant Singh wrote of their feud: "Indira could not stomach a woman more good-looking than herself and insulted her in Parliament, calling her a bitch and a glass doll. Gayatri brought the worst out in Indira Gandhi: her petty, vindictive side" (Gopinath 2022). Both married mothers, both daughters of India's pre-Independence aristorcracy—nevertheless, their battle was framed not just as a battle between differing forms of politics, but of differing visions for women

in politics, hence Singh's characterization of Gandhi's ire as the bitter jealousy of an unappealing but ambitious bitch.

Rajasthan has a long memory, and the suffering of the Rajmata at the hands of the Hindu right's most hated woman was not easily forgotten. Prem was not a born Jaipurite and had been thirteen years old when the Rajmata died, but recalled her with all the affection of someone who remembered her entire rule. He would become so distraught at the thought of the princess in prison that he would often be near tears as he repeated the story of her marriage, political ascendancy, and arrest. Describing what Congress had done to her and to members of other princely families by revoking the privy purses, Prem used the words *galat* (wrong) and *paap* (sin). "The royal family was always for the people," he said. "But the people are foolish. We don't recognize that which is *apna* (our own) and will fall for any easy promise."

I found it strange that a queen who had been educated in Europe, had been featured in *Vogue,* and was famed as a cosmopolitan beauty would be accepted so viscerally into a movement that was predicated on rejection of a so-called cosmopolitan or elite identity as necessary for social advancement. If the Rathods and those like them disdained the English-speaking, Western-dressing elites who went out for dinner in ritzy Khan Market and spent their time discussing European politics and their Ivy League educations, why would a woman like Gayatri Devi inspire so much devotion? Like many young Indians I met, Prem had not grown up during the rule of the Gandhis or during Emergency, but related the injustices that the government had visited upon the people with vivid, visceral intensity—often with more intensity than their parents and grandparents, who had actively experienced the events of the 1970s and 1980s. This was particularly true of the young Rajputs I knew, who often seemed to be more pained by the loss of their former princely lifestyles than their relatives who had actually lived

through the period of decline. In 1967, *Time* magazine characterized Gayatri Devi's voting bloc as "former subjects, nostalgic for the good old days of low prices and far less democracy" ("India: A Battle Royal"). For Prem and his comrades, it often seemed as if the battle between Gayatri Devi and Indira Gandhi was a metaphor for the battle they saw themselves waging—the battle between a genteel and considerate way of life, cool, easy, and refined, and the noxious and divisivie culture of post-Independence politics, in which those who were not even *apna* had managed to leverage alternative forms of power, predicated on alternative notions of caste and class organizing, to get ahead. Gayatri Devi's wealth and sophistication was not worth remarking on, because it was emblematic of their own suffering—they who had once had so much and now found themselves with little to show for it.

Despite Prem's indictment of the Gandhi-Nehru family for their anti-democratic activities, he maintained that the extra-constitutional decision to revoke Kashmir's special status was not only acceptable, but necessary for the preservation of India's safety. "Nothing will get done without some muscle," he told me. "If Modi does not act outside the law, then he will not get anything accomplished. Parliament is like that only." There was a strong feeling that the suspension of the democratic process was not just desired, but necessary, in order to bring about Modi's proposed changes. Moments in which Modi and his government appeared to transgress the limits of democratic conduct were applauded, despite almost universal pride in India's status as the world's largest democracy.

"What about all the people who will die?" I asked Prem. I had been following the story closely, and though the government had promised a peaceful and low-key transition, it was abundantly clear that the threat of violence was hanging heavy. At that time there was very little news coming out of Kashmir. Fifty thousand Indian jawans were being moved into the state to

maintain law and order. Hindu pilgrims and tourists had been evacuated en masse. The Muslim-dominant area was under military occupation, with Internet, television, and mobile phone services suspended. There were rumors that Kashmiri journalists were being arrested on the streets of Srinagar, to keep them from reporting what was going on in the Valley. The imprisoned opposition leaders were tweeting via their spokespeople in Delhi, saying that they had received no justification for their imprisonment.[20]

Prem looked at me, confused. "What are we supposed to do?" he asked me. "They are throwing rocks." Young Kashmiris, mostly teenage boys, sometimes pelted patrolling Indian jawans with rocks; it was so common in urban Kashmir that such boys were known as *sangbaaz* ("stone-game players"). The Indian Intelligence Bureau claimed that Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's foreign intelligence agency, paid off the teenage boys to throw stones. The response of the Indian patrolmen was to retaliate with rubber bullets, pellet guns, and tear gas; many Kashmiri *sangbaaz* boys, and other civil protestors and bystanders, had been blinded by the pellets. Prem did not perceive this retaliation as outsized in scope. "If they do something to us, then we too should do something to them," he told me. "It's only right." Furthermore, the prospect of bearing witness to state violence against the Kashmiri population was not only considered natural, but pleasurable, by many others besides Prem. Prem (and Pooja, who was in a state of apoplectic excitement the whole day when Modi's decision was announced) was overjoyed at the idea of a "war" against Kashmiri Muslims and against Pakistan by proxy. "Modi

[20] Opposition leaders Mehbooba Mufti, Omar Abdullah, and Farooq Abdullah were placed under a six-month "preventative house arrest" within hours of the announcement of Article 370's revocation. When the six-month house arrest was lifted in February 2020, all three were booked under the Public Safety Act (PSA), which permits detention without charge for a period of up to two years. Modi claimed publicly that all three had made anti-national remarks that threatened public safety: "Mehbooba Mufti said India had betrayed Kashmir and we would have been better with deciding otherwise in 1947. Can we accept such people? Omar Abdullah said removing Article 370 will separate Kashmir from India. Farooq Abdullah said if Article 370 is removed, no one will unfurl the national flag in Kashmir. How can we side with them?"

has rocked awesomely today!" Prem informed me, grinning. He and Pooja danced together around the living room, pleased with the prospect of a "war against the terrorists." *"Aaj hum Pakistan ko ek hi thappad maare hain,"* ("Today, we've given one slap only to Pakistan") Aarti said approvingly, watching them celebrate.

They were not the only ones to feel pleasure in the thought of the Kashmir situation. A running joke amongst one family I visited was that, with Article 370 having been revoked, they would buy land in Kashmir and sell it to me, a gullible foreigner, at an extortionate rate. On social media platforms like TikTok, young men made videos of them declaring that "*Jammu Kashmir ki lugai milegi humein"* ("We'll take wives from Jammu and Kashmir") and "*Main toh chala Kashmir, mujhe Dilli mein ladki nahin mil rahi hai"* ("I'll go to Kahmir, I'm not meeting girls in Delhi"). Users posted pictures of Kashmiri women in *hijab,* captioned with the Hindi phrase *"Tumhaara sasuraal"* ("Your in-laws' house"). Their enjoyment at the thought of violence was corroborated by news coverage of the special status revocation. On *India Today,* the Hindi news station the Rathods watched most regularly, the stories on Kashmir generally featured images of a concerned-looking Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, surrounded by laughing BJP parliamentarians celebrating their "win" against Pakistan. A comedy cartoon shown during commercial breaks on *India Today* featured Modi and Amit Shah spreading the seed of goodwill across Kashmir, as a male singer sang an anthem set to a song from the 2000 film *Mission Kashmir:* "*Bharat ko sang ab la kar, surakshit rashtra banaya. 370 ko hata ke tiranga leheraya. Jhoom, jhoom, jhoom, badle Kashmir ka manjar. Sab jaan lein hum than lein…Kashmir ab hoga behter"* ("Having brought it now into India, we've made the state safe. Having defeated 370 we have waved the tricolor. Dance, dance, dance, we changed Kashmir's nature. All know that we are determined…now Kashmir will be improved.")

My respondents regularly complained bitterly about the lack of care that existed within their homes and in their family life, and often expressed deep concern about the place of women in India, their concern for the environment, and the upliftment of the poor. Narayan Singh regularly informed me about the social destruction that had been wreaked in Champa Gaon through the drug use that many farmers turned to as a way of managing stress, and Aarti would sigh talking about how many people in Jaipur and beyond could not afford to pay for their electricity and food bills. Janaki bemoaned how Indian women knew little about their own bodies, and how a lack of sexual education had left women bruised, bleeding, and sick in too many households. Prem had patiently explained to Aarti's mother about gay and lesbian identities, and how gays and lesbians deserved the right to love who they loved.

Yet, as I sat typing up my notes the night after I had watched him and Pooja dance in the living room, all I wrote was "I am most struck by the cruelty."

I thought of Prem months later in the late winter of 2019, when protests by Muslim university students at Jamia Milia Islamiya University in Delhi against the Citizenship Amendment Act, which would have fast-tracked Indian citizenship to all religious minorities in South Asian countries *except* Muslim refugees, were rocked by Rambhakt Gopal, a seventeen-year-old boy from Uttar Pradesh who fired at protestors with a pistol, shouting *"Yeh lo azaadi"* ("Take this freedom"). Just a few days after Gopal shot at Jamia protestors, another shooter, Kapil Gurjar, attacked ongoing anti-CAA protests at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, shouting *"Desh ke gaddaron ko, goli maaro saalon ko"* ("Traitors to the country, shoot those fuckers"). In reporting conducting after the shootings, it was noted that the two young men did not come from "communal families;" that is, they did not come from families that had longstanding associations with nationalist paramilitary organizations like the RSS or Bajrang Dal. In fact, Gurjar's father

had once contested a local election as a member of the Bahujan Samaj Party. Gopal's family were working-class Brahmins who owned a single corner *paan* stall; Gurjar's family were middle-class OBCs who owned a successful chain of dairy stores and owned rental properties. Relatives and neighbors remarked that both young men spent an inordinate amount of time online, looking at anti-Muslim memes and postings on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp; it must have been the onslaught of hateful rhetoric and images, journalists concluded, that radicalized these young men. Much has been written about the unfettered freneticism of the circulation of hate speech and misinformation on digital platforms—the ephemerality of the information, the anonymity of sourcing, the difficulty in quashing rumor and falsehood, and the unimaginable audience that such information can reach (Phillips 2015, Citron 2013, Ford et.al 2013, Sandoval 2013, Milner 2014, Suler 2004. Nakamura 2002, Dahlberg 2001, Donath 1999, Stivale 1997, Tepper 1997, Turkle 1996). Something must be said, however, about the affective element of what Jodi Dean (2001) has termed the cybersalon—a space of speech that exists outside the polite confines of civil society, speech which cannot be termed "rational" as the classical public sphere of Habermas would like to define all civically valid speech, but nevertheless has great political force. The violent speech of hateful memes online is not generated from the internet itself, but has its origins in the utterings of members of the flesh-and-blood public sphere. The *desh ke gaddaron ko* slogan chanted by Gurjar as he fired into the Shaheen Bagh crowd had been uttered first at a rally by the BJP parliamentarian and union minister Anurag Thakur; although he claimed that this slogan was not meant to be taken literally, Gopal's bullet hit a Jamia Milia Islamia student in the arm, and Gurjar aimed at Muslim boys in Shaheen Bagh. Such speech may not be rational but does have a force both discursive and material.

Similar rage emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Delhi as well as Jaipur. In Delhi, one of the virus' hotspots emerged out of a single gathering of the Islamic proselytization group Tablighi Jama'at in the Muslim-majority neighborhood of Nizamuddin East in mid-March of 2020. In Jaipur, although the first case of viral infection had emerged in Janaki and Ashok's home neighborhood of Padmini Nagar, and was first identified amongst a group of Italian tourists, COVID-19 quickly became associated with a secondary hotspot in the crowded, working-class Muslim-majority neighborhood of Ramganj Bazaar. During the national 21-day lockdown, during which people were not permitted to leave their homes for any reason if they lived near a confirmed COVID-19 case, Jaipur Police quickly erected barricades in the lanes of Ramganj Bazaar, designed to prevent people from leaving their homes and mixing freely with each other. A news story by the journalist Barkha Dutt showed police huddled together under makeshift lean-tos, protecting themselves from the heat, armed with AK-47 rifles to prevent entry into or out of the neighborhood.

Images of the barricade were circulated on the Instagram page @jaipur_diaries, a local Jaipur-based account focusing primarily on local news, reviews and photographs of restaurants and nightclubs, memes about local youth culture, and other topics appealing to the city's teenagers and young adults. The comments underneath the posting of the images quickly turned contentious. Hindu and Muslim users, including users from Ramganj itself, argued with each other over the cause of the virus' spread and the culpability of Ramganj denizens. Some Hindu users conflated the outbreak in Muslim-majority Ramganj to the outbreak in Nizamuddin East. A user identified as Akshay Saraswat, arguing with a Muslim user, wrote *"Tabligi Jamaat se corona 10x speed se spread hua hai…hum bhi hamaari ram navmi celebrate kar sakte the par nahin kare…thik hai?"* ("Because of the Tablighi Jama'at Coronavirus has spread at ten times

the speed…we too could have celebrated our Ram Navami but we didn't…ok?") In fact, Ram Navami, the Hindu festival commemorating the birth of Lord Rama, had been celebrated all over India, with much national controversy; nevertheless, the images of infected Tablighi Jama'at workers became viral (in both senses) images in the mind of many social media users, reproducing themselves in infinite numbers to spread the disease across India. Given that imagery, it is not surprising that many Hindu users, when talking about the denizens of Ramganj Bazaar and other Muslim *bastis,* used phrases associated with contagion, horror, and extermination when discussing how to stop the spread of the virus. One user, identified as an Arjun Dubey, commented *"Jala do pure Ramganj ko"* ("Burn down all of Ramganj") while another user espoused a similar sentiment in English: "Any creature that comes out of there, shoot it."

In the wake of COVID-19 the rage of the middle-class *aam aadmi* took on new dimensions. Despite the violent language they used, Hindu users used COVID-19 to reframe themselves as rational actors, helpless against the irrational, disease-spreading movements of the Muslims who they blamed for spreading the disease. Alongside calls for denizens of Ramganj Bazaar to be shot and burned, users expressed frustration that "because of these Ramganj *madarchod log"* ("motherfucking people") corona has come to Jaipur." Akshay Saraswat's statement that "we (Hindus) too could have celebrated our Ram Navami but we didn't," regardless of the actual facts of the matter, frames caste Hindus as obedient to the will of the state and obedient to public health strictures of mutual care, whereas Muslims, presumably slaves to their baser urges for sociality, continue to gather, consume meat, conduct unhygienic bathing practices, and otherwise engage in behaviors that are presumed to spread the disease, even as the state endlessly capitulates to them (what is sometimes termed "appeasement" by the

Hindu right). However, if COVID-19 appeared to spread more virulently in Muslim-majority localities, it was not due to aspects of Muslim sociality or an assumed lack of hygiene. Rather, ghettoization in Jaipur, which had been a result of housing segregation following the Babri Masjid riots in the 1990s, had relegated the majority of Jaipur's Muslims to cramped *bastis* where poor housing stock and congested homes and thoroughfares made it difficult, if not impossible, to social distance (Mayaram 2525). Data collected by Tabeenah Ajnum writing for *Caravan* further demonstrated how fear of retaliation for participating in anti-CAA/NRC riots had led many people in Ramganj to refuse to undergo COVID-19 screening; Ramganj resident Noor Bano, who had participated in anti-CAA protests in February, told Ajnum that she had refused to allow her family to be screened for COVID-19 and have their details collected for contact tracing because "in the back of our minds we were suspicious that they are collecting our whereabouts because of our months long participation at the protest site" (Ajnum 2020).

Such incidents are backed by anger, rage, and frustration, but the rage I saw amongst my Jaipur interlocutors as they considered communal events was tinged with pleasure and enjoyment. After all, Prem and Pooja were not enraged as they celebrated the Centre's actions in Kashmir—they were laughing and happy. "Modi has rocked *awesomely* today," Prem informed me when I first saw him on August 5, with all the joy of a sports spectator watching his favorite player score a goal. While my interlocutors often grumbled about being left out of government schemes and about the specter of corruption in Indian political life, they did not mind such violence or corruption when it was oriented towards communal and social enemies. Parvez Ghassem-Fachandi, in his ethnographic work with rioters who participated in the 2002 Gujarat communal riots, has written about the euphemistic usage of the English word *enjoi (enjoy)* amongst middle-class rioters. While *enjoi* takes on a valence of sexual violence—the pleasure

found in nonconsensually "enjoying" the women of enemy communities—it also describes the pleasure found in consumption of goods (the word initially entered common Gujarati parlance from a Coca-Cola commercial of the 1990s) and the similar kinds of pleasure found in perpetrating violent words and action (Ghassem-Fachandi 2010, 160). Simply put, it feels good to be cruel. Adam Serwer has written about the pleasurable dimension of cruelty in American political life; from white lynch mobs exchanging smiling proto-selfies as black bodies are tortured and burned in the background to supporters of Donald Trump cheering as the president mocked Brett Kavanaugh's accuser Christine Blasey Ford, he simply states, "The cruelty is the point." Lili Loofborouw, in her analysis of the Kavanaugh case and the larger sexual crisis amongst white, middle-class American men, has discussed gendered cruelty as a form of social intimacy; that is, the terror enacted upon the bodies of women is a secondary benefit to the pleasurable feelings of bonding with other men that such cruelty produces. The enactment of middle-class rage on the bodies of religious minorities, the poor, and the lower-castes stem not from fear, but from joy and pleasure. To hate was quite simply to *enjoi.*

Although my respondents did not overtly identify as Hindu nationalists, many of them maintained suspicion towards their Muslim and Dalit neighbors, using rhetoric that was frequently intermixed with indictments against the poor. I was frequently warned away from going near Ramganj Bazaar or even the touristy thoroughfare of Mirza Ismail Road, since they were well-known as Muslim areas and because "*beggar-class log"* ("beggar-class people") lived there. The presence of a well-dressed foreign woman, and moreover a well-dressed foreign woman who "spoke like a Rajput" and did not travel with a male companion, might run the risk of "trouble" or violence against me. Some respondents told stories of personal violence committed against them and their families by Muslims in order to underscore the seriousness of

their warnings. Janaki told me a story of a small communal riot that had occurred in Jai Singh Enclave when a young Hindu man, a distant cousin of hers, had accidentally hit a Muslim child with his scooter in the Walled City. Although the accident was nonfatal and the child had been fine, a group of Muslims from the Walled City had pursued his cousin into the commercial area of Jai Singh Enclave, carrying cricket bats and riding three to a scooter. Having located him in the market, they pulled him off his scooter and began beating him; only the intervention of some tough local Sikhs had warded off the Walled City boys. The earnestness of Janaki's story was intended to convey to me the irrationality with which Muslims conducted their everyday affairs, as well as their social interactions; if they were prepared to kill this young Hindu man for "lightly bumping" a child with his scooter, what would they do to me?

I could find no confirmation of Janaki's story in any of Jaipur's newspapers, but I was struck by the similarity between her story and stories related by Mayaram surrounding the 1989-1990 communal riots in Jaipur that had followed the release of the Mandal Commission report, as well as the rioting surrounding the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992. Rumors of the molestation and imprisonment of children, particularly girls, fanned the flames of communal violence in Jaipur at those times. In narratives of rioting, clashes between working-class Muslims from the Walled City and Ramganj Bazaar and middle-class Hindus and Jains from Ram Pratap Nagar and Sajjanpuri were most frequent, with Hindu rioters led by state BJP and RSS officials. What set apart the Jaipur riots, and indeed many of the Mandal Commission riots more generally, from other forms of communal riots were their distinct middle-class identity; rioters in Jaipur during the Mandal Commission clashes were overwhelmingly made up of University of Rajasthan students as well as middle-class Marwari and Rajput businessmen, who articulated a middle-class rage against caste reservations that, in line with Ornit Shani's description (2013) of

the 1985 caste-communal riots in Ahmedabad, took on a communal, anti-Muslim character as the riots progressed.

It was tempting to see the reactions of my interlocutors towards this violence as a constituent form of anti-politics, spurred by anxiety and fear over their being "forgotten" by those who purported to represent them. This certainly factored into how they perceived themselves; Pooja frequently lamented her father's underemployment as a non-English-speaking caste Hindu who was only BA pass, and despite her legal training was adamant that she would not find a job upon graduation because of "this bloody reservation." Prem fretted about what was then a proposal by the Trump administration to cancel the H1-B skilled worker visa program, as he claimed to me that "as I am a Rajput, I will not find any admission into a university for my master's." Yet more often than not, their responses to the political machinations of the day, particularly the actions of the Modi government during the CAA/NRC protests and the COVID-19 lockdown, were amusement, feelings of solidarity with their community, and joy. After I had returned to the United States, Pooja in particular kept me abreast of her political opinions through memes she sent me via Instagram. During the CAA/NRC protests she sent me memes claiming that "the common man is with Modi" and that "only Pakistan and Bollywood liberals are against him." During the first COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020, Pooja sent me memes asking "which community was it that brought corona into Jaipur?" Bearded men in long Arab-style robes were photoshopped with images of the red, spiked COVID virus, with laughing emojis and Pooja's comment—SACH HAI NA? ("True, isn't it?")

The pleasurable feelings which were associated with the government's actions towards minorities, along with perceptions that they represented a *jan andolan* (people's movement) against caste activists and Muslim self-advancement, allowed my respondents to feel as if they

were part of the political process, and that they were represented and listened to. Many professed to abhor violence. Pooja's mother wept openly when she saw images of members of the Hindu Mahasabha shooting at a picture of Gandhiji during a Gandhi Jayanti protest, and Pooja posted on Instagram that she was praying for an end to deadly riots in Delhi that accompanied the CAA/NRC protests at Shaheen Bagh. Yet they did not mind such violence when it was enacted by state forces. Political repression beyond the bounds of democracy was appropriate, and indeed necessary, when it served middle-class, upper-caste Hindu interests; in the case of Kashmir, for instance, the economic interests represented by a liberalized Kashmir created feelings of joy and progress "mixed" with anti-Muslim and anti-dissident feelings. And, despite this supposed rejection of violence, the lack of dissent amongst this broad swath of the population creates a broad consensus for such enactment of violence by the state. Pooja was not the first person I heard claim that "the common man was always with Modi;" how could he not be, if the common man was by definition only constituted of those members of Modi's base?

A secondary aspect of this broad social consensus is the close relationship between the ideologies of the state and the ideologies of Hindi-language media. In Jaipur, and in North India more broadly, the presence of Modi and his values in film, television, and news media is constant and ever-present. Members of the non-elite middle classes, particularly upper-caste Hindus, are able to see reassurances that their concerns are valid and worthy of being addressed within these forms of media, and also are able to see the diminishment of social movements like ongoing anti-caste and anti-communal activist movements.

Conclusion

Middle-class rage politics in India emerged out of the highly caste- and communal-concerned politics of the 1980s and 1990s reservation and Babri Masjid debates. Attempts at increasing political representation for Dalits and Muslims through the form of reservation, political bloc consolidation, and strategic empowerment of these groups were met by rioting which was not atypical in Indian political life; what *was* atypical was the shift towards communal and caste violence being increasingly enacted by members of the emergent caste Hindu middle class, who saw in the enfranchisement of Dalits and Muslims their own inherent disenfranchisement. Perceived favoritism of Dalits and religious minorities by political elites further refined the anti-political aspect of middle-class organizing in this period, and the middle class increasingly adopted the figure of the *aam aadmi* (common man) for their own, framing "averageness" and "normality" as political identities into which their rage at minority enfranchisement could successfully funneled. Women, as well as men, appear to have adopted this rage politics wholeheartedly. While middle-class rage in some ways constitutes a form of anti-politics, given its natural distrust of elites and of typical networks of power brokerage in Indian political life, in the age of Modi it has been given new force as rage politics are integrated into the official policies of the state through actions like the CAA/NRC registries, the declassification of caste atrocities as hate crimes according the ST/SC Bill, and the covert allowance of violence against Muslims and Dalits. My respondents' reactions to the August 2019 Kashmir conflict, the ongoing anti-CAA/NRC protests in January of 2020, and the COVID-19 lockdown in the spring and summer of 2020 were marked not only by expressions of anxiety, frustration, and powerlessness, but of joy, self-assurance, and approval of the government's stochastic and actual violence against caste and religious minorities. Hindi-language media, particularly the Hindi film industry, reimagine middle-class, caste Hindu values as a form of

progressive political activism; this activism, which draws on the aesthetics of leftist and progressive social movements, nevertheless reify state power and power structures of caste and religion—a reflection of Walter Benjamin's assertion that "fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (Benjamin, trans. Zohn 1998, 19). The vast proliferation and circulation of media around rage politics provides a consolidation of a central middle-class viewpoint which provides a consensus for more extreme and material forms of violence. Yet even this consolidated viewpoint is not without its ruptures and subversions, made possible through the kind of forms that also allow its proliferation.

CHAPTER FOUR

OUR TIME WILL COME: A CINEMATIC INTERLUDE

Everywhere I went in the late winter and early spring in North Indian cities I saw the T-shirt. It was being worn on the streets of Jaipur. I saw it in the bylanes of Hauz Khas Village and Connaught Place, popular hangout spots for middle-class young people in Delhi. It was being worn by teenagers on their way to school, clutching on to their batchmates' waists as they sat on the back of their scootys. It was being worn by Uber and autorickshaw drivers. It was being worn by idle young men whiling away their time in the malls and on the red plastic seats in front of Sharmaji Kulcha Stand and Anokha Tea Stall—a shirt in black or bright red bearing the Hindi slogan APNA TIME AAYEGA! *MY TIME WILL COME!*[21] Indeed, it was impossible to go anywhere in Jaipur without hearing the opening verses of the titular song blasting from car radios and from the back rooms of general stores.

Kaun bola mujhse na ho payega?
Apna time aayega!
Yeh shabdon ka jwala
Meri bediyan pighlayega
Jitna tu ne boya hai tu
Utna hi to khaayega
Aisa mera khwaab hai
Jo darr ko bhi satayega
Zinda mera khwaab
Ab kaise tu dafnayega?

Kyun?
Kyunki apna time aayega

Who says I can't do it?

[21] The Hindi possessive *apna* is often translated as "my own," but it can also have a collective valence i.e. "our own."

My time will come!
The fire of my words
Will melt away my shackles
Whatever you've sown
That's what you'll reap
I have such a dream
That it makes even fear tremble
My dream is alive
Now how will you bury it?

Why?
Because my time will come!

The film from which "Apna Time Aayega" emerged, *Gully Boy,* was one of the hits of early 2019, intensely marketed and starring two of the Hindi film industry's biggest current stars, Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt. The film draws its inspiration from the lives of the Mumbai rappers Vivian Fernandes and Naved Shaikh, better known as DIVINE and Naezy, who are considered pioneers of so-called "gully *(gali)* rap." Gully rap, referring to the Hindi word for the alleyways *(galiyan)* that segment neighborhoods in urban India, emerged from working-class districts of Mumbai and focuses on themes of working-class culture, the travails of religious minorities in India (DIVINE and Naezy are Christian and Muslim, respectively), and on leftist political themes; gully rappers lend their support to striking students and workers across the country. The film borrowed the gritty aesthetics and the barely concealed rage of gully rappers and their environments to build a story that extends beyond the world of gully rap to the larger plane of youth dissatisfaction in India, following the trajectories of a series of different characters in order to understand the travails and tragedies of Young India.

I saw *Gully Boy* with my friend Nandini in Delhi, at the PVR Icon cinema hall at the DLF Promenade Mall in Vasant Kunj. In emails home to my family I often described Promenade, referring to my childhood mall, as "Ross Park on steroids." It is one of three high-end malls next

to each other in Vasant Kunj—DLF Emporio holds multinational luxury brands like Gucci and Tom Ford, while Ambience is a family-oriented mall with an even more upscale cinema hall, the PVR Directors' Cut. DLF Promenade, the biggest of the three, is no less grand. It is full of youth-oriented local and Western brands; everything from Zara to Sephora to the ateliers of well-known Indian designers like Ritu Kumar. On a previous visit to the mall I had been bewildered to find myself sitting on a bench there eating a Krispy Kreme donut, a scene so similar to my own childhood that I, for a moment, genuinely forgot I was in India. *"Sab milti hai"* ("everything is available"), Nandini said laughingly, perhaps noticing my stupefied, drunk-on-capitalism face. PVR Icon is a fitting theater for its location—the walls of the lobby are gilded and the screening rooms have recliners. Nandini was self-conscious about the ostentatiousness of the mall, especially as we settled in to watch a movie that we knew was about people in desperate poverty. Well-dressed couples and groups of teenagers settled in around us. "None of these people listen to gully rap," she whispered to me. "They don't even know what a gully *is."*

But they certainly knew *Gully Boy.* When *"Apna Time Aayega"* played, the crowd went genuinely nuts, something I had not anticipated. The teenagers screamed, stamped their feet, headbanged along to the music, and even sedate elders clapped approvingly. I looked at the teenage boy next to Nandini: in the glow of the screen, it almost looked as if he was weeping. It was a display of emotion that I sometimes saw when I sat with the frontbenchers during patriotic Akshay Kumar films at the Raj Mandir single-screen cinema hall in Jaipur, but that I had never seen in a ritzy Delhi multiplex. As William Mazzarella (2013) has discussed, the space of the cinema hall in India is closely mediated according to class, gender, and caste; social interactions, interactions with the screen, and the habitus and emotional affect of cinemagoers has been historically regulated and continues to be closely monitored on a horizontal level as well as at the

level of organizations like the Central Board of Film Certification. The raucous emotionality that is the hallmark of Indian filmgoing has therefore been limited in the urban multiplex, which is seen to cater to an emotionally and physically restrained middle-class family audience, rather than the presumably male, Hindi-speaking, working-class audiences of the single-screen halls. Here, upper-middle-class young people of all genders were shouting, clapping, dancing in the aisles, and cheering. Nandini looked like she wanted to sink into her seat and disappear. Yet I was fascinated by the apparent resonance that this film, focusing on the lives of working-class Muslims and Dalits in Mumbai, had amongst middle-class Hindus who had spent Rs. 500 on a ticket and whose cars, out in the parking lot, had stickers of RSS and BJP symbols and the particular fierce-looking image of Lord Hanuman that had recently become a symbol of urban Hindutva in the South Delhi area. Walking out to Nandini's car after the movie, I saw, again, a gaggle of boys sporting the infamous T-shirt. *What is it about those damn shirts?* I wondered, watching them head out towards the main road. Rather than burning down cinema halls and protesting, like had recently occurred with the film *Padmaavat,* this film was seemingly embraced by all political echelons of society. Why was this?

There was, of course, no way to really know how those who saw *Gully Boy* with Nandini and me that night in February 2019 thought about their personal politics. Yet those who DLF Promenade drew to itself—the upper-middle classes with cash to burn and the time to burn it—were poised in two months' time, during the April 2019 election, to return Narendra Modi to the Prime Minister's seat with even larger returns, approving of a regime whose bread and butter was the targeted murder of people like those we had just watched on screen for three hours. Why were people whose personal politics were rooted in the negation of Muslim life in public able to develop such an empathetic connection with *Gully Boy's* Muslim, Dalit, and poor characters, so

much so that they projected themselves as the suffering subjects? *When will my time come?* people asked—including those people whose time had already come.

In this chapter, I argue that *Gully Boy,* despite its close connection to the world of Mumbai gully rap and the life histories of DIVINE and Naezy, provides no political future for its characters, moving away from gully rap's dreams of a world liberated from casteism, communal politics, and class violence towards one in which the nebulous specters of "corruption," "oppression" and "class differentiation" are defeated through individual choices and "pluck" rather than structural social change or a mass mobilization of the working classes and religious and caste minorities. The Muslim and Dalit identities of its main characters are routinely ignored or seen as problems to be solved, rather than identities from which their rage at the world emerges. The rage of *Gully Boy* is one that refuses to trouble the structures of authority in its dissection of the lives of the poor in urban India. This structureless anger allows for its almost immediate appropriation by those whose anger is, in fact, a right-wing, majoritarian anger—an anger that exists in stated opposition to the anger of oppression that moves the film itself forward. This is a choice that explains its overall popularity, but that also opens up a number of potential questions for *why* the toothless rage of *Gully Boy* appealed to such a broad spectrum of predominantly male, middle-class, middle-to-high-caste, Hindu young people.

Gully Boy: **Rage Without Structure**

Gully Boy centers on college student Murad Ahmed (Singh) who lives with his family, including his abusive father, in a tenement in Dharavi, Mumbai's largest slum. His father has recently brought home a young second wife, his former mistress, and Murad escapes his disastrous home life by cultivating a love of American rap music and intermittently dating

Safeena Firdausi (Bhatt), a hotheaded *hijabi* middle-class medical student attempting to escape an arranged marriage. A chance encounter with local rapper Shrikant "MC Sher" Bhosle during a college festival leads Murad into the world of Mumbai's underground rap scene, where he draws on his acute sense of oppression and injustice he feels as a young working-class man. A video that he and MC Sher produce featuring Murad's rap goes viral, and Murad decides to compete in a contest to find "India's greatest rapper," who will open for the American rapper Nas at his Mumbai concert. His mother's expulsion from her marital home requires Murad to get an office job that seems to threaten his dreams of rap superstardom, until at long last, in a plotline echoing American rap biopics like *8 Mile* and *Get Rich or Die Trying,* he decides that his time will come and attends the open mic that ultimately lands him the title of "India's greatest rapper." In between, he reconciles with his father, has an affair with and then breaks up with NRI DJ Shweta "Sky," and avoids being caught up in the criminal schemes of his neighborhood friends, low-level petty thieves who are thrashed by the police for stealing cars. Yet Murad embraces his working-class origins as a so-called "gully *(gali)* boy," a young man from the twisting alleyways of the slums, adopting the pejorative as his stage name and bringing a new, uniquely Indian sensibility towards the world of rap.

Gully Boy's popularity perhaps lay in its ability to speak to a multitude of youth concerns that, despite the film's focus on working-class and lower-middle-class subjects, span a wide variety of classes. Many educated young men in India have had difficulties in securing satisfying employment and accessing the social respect such employment entails; while this unequal access is often mediated by caste, class, and regionality, it affects various social strata (Jeffrey et. al 2008). *Gully Boy* is dedicated to exploring these questions. In one scene, Murad, working his father's job as a driver in a wealthy household temporarily, is insulted by his boss during an

argument about the boss' daughter's decision to attend fashion school rather than go for an MBA; the father, finding out that Murad holds a bachelor's degree, tells his daughter "Even *he* has a degree!" Later on, Murad witnesses the family's daughter in tears; although he is unable to comfort her because of their class stratification, he thinks to himself "*You're near, but you're a world apart. Why am I helpless? I cannot console you, I cannot reach out to you, I cannot wipe away your tears."* In that moment, Murad and the wealthy daughter are caught in the mutual pain of living in the pressure-cooker of contemporary Indian life but cannot find mutual solidarity due to the multiple layers of class, caste, and religious stratification between them. Murad's on-again, off-again girlfriend Safeena sneaks around behind her parents' backs with Murad, is ambivalent about whether or not to wear her *hijab,* and worries about the state of her career after marriage. Her travails speak to the concerns of "modern girls" across India as they attempt to balance family desires with the desires of their hearts. Safeena wants to be a surgeon, but her family would rather she get married; she skips family weddings and events in favor of studying to avoid the prying eyes of marriage-minded aunties; such scenes played out dozens of times amongst Pooja Rathod and her friends. Despite the difference between her and Safeena in religion and class, she saw herself in Safeena's story; when she and I watched the film together on television a few months after I saw it in Delhi, Pooja pressed her hands to her chest in sympathetic understanding in a scene where Safeena scream-argues with her mother over her expectations of marriage. In another scene, Murad visits MC Sher's home, where he meets his invalid Marathi-speaking father (who, sitting amongst the squalor of his working-class *chawl,* ironically asks Murad, 'Where did you come from? Some Muslim ghetto?') and his single-mother sister. He discovers that MC Sher's "day job" is as a wedding DJ, and seems to understand that he and Sher share a common frustration. They are linked in this suffering, even though Murad is a

working-class Muslim and MC Sher's Bhosle surname would identify him to any savvy Indian theatergoer as a Maratha *manoos,* a native Mumbaikar whose demographic forms the backbone of the Shiv Sena anti-Muslim bloc in Mumbai. These scenes articulate the experience of frustrated dreams and difficult family life that exists in a cross-section of the urban poor, both Hindu and Muslim, Maratha and migrant.

Most remarkable, perhaps, is how the film exploded into the middle-class Hindu youth consciousness despite being centered solely on working-class, Muslim, and Dalit main characters. Furthermore, the film does not see the ultimate "goal" of its characters to be middle-class advancement and upwardly mobile living; rather, it indicates how its subjects find their liberation in their own full-throated embrace of working-class Muslim life. *Gully Boy,* at times, displays remarkable sensitivity towards its poor Muslim and Dalit subjects, particularly in its exuberant celebration of Dharavi's diversity and its resilience in the face of endemic poverty and police brutality. Consider, for example, its adaptation of DIVINE and Naezy's 2015 song "Mere Gully Mein" ("In My Lane"), both in the original recording and in the film a love letter to the unique aspects of slum life:

Tere shooteron ka khaas mere gully mein
Poore sheher ki awaaz mere gully mein
Prayer aarti aur namaz mere gully mein
Maa pe gaali toh chamaat mere gully mein
Police aayi laagi vaat mere gully mein
Ek number saari baat mere gully mein
Accha woh nikli tere gully se par ab woh mere gully mein

Your best shooter lives in my lane
My lane is the voice of the whole city
Prayer, aarti, and namaz are in my lane
We'll slap you if you curse in my lane
It's a problem when the police come in my lane
Everything is first class in my lane
Yeah, she left from your lane, but now she's in mine!

Later on in the song, DIVINE and Naezy assert: *"Roshan chaukhat avli bawaal yeh/Raunak Bombay ki chawl kamaal yeh"* ("The crossroads are full of light/This slum is the glory of Bombay").

The sequence for this song in the film depicts, in a single long-take shot, Singh dancing through a number of Dharavi street scenes. He receives *aashirwaad* (blessings) from a *hijra* (third-gender person), dances with groups of young Muslim boys attending a rooftop *madrasa,* and interrupts a housewife at her ironing. One sees in this sequence, which is an almost shot-for-shot remake of DIVINE and Naezy's original video, the representation of Dharavi and other such neighborhoods as a site of potential alternate futures for India, futures that exist beyond communal and caste politics, and that center India's poor, rather than the sky-high apartment towers and glitzy shopping blocks, as the "glory" of a globalized, modernized India. *Gully Boy* suggests as much in a later scene in which Murad visits Shweta, the NRI DJ who has taken an interest in him, in her parents' luxury flat in the ultra-ritzy Mumbai suburb of Andheri. Washing his hands in her bathroom, Murad realizes that the bathroom itself is larger than his family home; the audience watches as he counts out the size of the bathroom step-by-step. Not long after, Shweta expresses sexual interest in Murad; although they've already kissed once, Murad refuses her advances, clearly shaken and discomfited by the whole situation. Sexual and romantic union with Shweta represents the kind of upward mobility that Pooja suggested as the goal of all middle- and lower-middle-class young people (see Chapter 2); Shweta's existence is a world which *seems* casteless, free from the communal and class tensions that plague the day-to-day existence of both Murad and Sher, and which would provide limitless opportunities for personal and professional growth for Murad, removed from his local *gali* environment and plunged into

the environment of India's global elites.[22] *Gully Boy* suggests, however, that true artistic and personal fulfillment lie in Murad's articulation of his working-class quotidian experience, rooted in the *jugaad* (do-it-yourself) sensibilities of the Muslim and Dalit urban poor.

Indeed, *Gully Boy* allows its subjects to imagine a number of different possibilities through their intimate relationships, including with their friends and family. The relationship between the Muslim Murad and Sher, who is implied to come from a Shiv Sena family, suggests the formation of a solidarity centered around the mutual experience of urban exploitation, family alienation, and class warfare; in turn, the relationship between Murad and Safeena suggests a solidarity of experience that crosses gender lines. Murad's explosive repudiation of his father, who has brought a second wife into the household, much to Murad's mother's pain, and generally veers between negligent and outright abusive, signifies a breakage in a long lineage of women's marginalization that even women themselves are implied to take part in; it is Murad's *dadi* (paternal grandmother) who attempts to enforce familial and patriarchal respect, screaming out to Murad and his mother *"Abbu hain tere! Iski himmat toh dekho! Aisa bana kiya tujhne?"* ("He is your father! Look at his nerve. That's how you brought him up?") as Murad pulls his *abbu* off of his mother. Murad's final goodbye to her: "Have your son look after you, since you have raised him so nobly."

Despite all of this countercultural dressing, it is difficult to understand exactly *who and what* it is that *Gully Boy* is rebelling against. Divine and NAEZY's original video makes it abundantly clear who it is their alternative lifeworlds are against—politicians (in the video represented as an obsequious Shiv Sena worker) and the police (who fruitlessly chase Divine and NAEZY through their *gali* in the video, ultimately frustrated by the two rappers). While the

[22] For more on savarna fetishization of the Muslim and Dalit body, see Kang (2023).

Gully Boy adaptation of the song keeps some of the lyrics, such as *"Chor mere gully mein woh toh sala mantri hai" (*"The robber of my lane is that asshole politician") but does not make the visual connection between the travails of the slum and the tensions of communal politics. There is certainly a streak of working-class rage; Murad's rhymes rail against the excesses of the rich and the destruction of the natural environment as a result of industrial expansion. *"Yahaan pe kheti kheti gandh/Kahin toh motimahal mein joi jee raha hai akela/Kahin to local dibbe mein hai rele pe hai rela/Unki seva inki meva, haan"* ("Here are fields full of garbage/One lives alone in his mansion/The other tries to find a place on the local [train]/His service is his duty, yeah") he raps in "Doori," his first viral hit. Yet this indictment of corruption and capitalist excess would not be out of place in an ad for Narendra Modi's policy points: "*Jitna kaala tera mann, utna kaala tera dhan"* ("Your money's as black as your heart"), Murad raps, invoking the specter of *kaala dhan* (black money) as the cause of Modi's demonetization policy in the winter of 2017. Despite the deaths of servants in line to extract money from ATMs and the suicides of farmers during the demonetization period, Modi's policies are in line with the aesthetics of *Gully Boy's* working-class/middle-class rage.

Working-class and leftist aesthetics are everywhere in *Gully Boy,* but are never fully explored, or are sublimated to nebulous concerns of corruption. Gully rappers like Maharya, whose 2018 song "Acche Din" ("Good Days") compares the Modi regime to ISIS, appear as background singers and extras in the film, but the film rarely seizes on the blazing politics of its sources. It sometimes appears puckishly, as in the song "Jingostan," where an unnamed rapper in a jam session sarcastically points out the violence inherent in India's jingoistic and nationalistic mood: "*Paakdo maaro kaato cheed do/Saaf suthri chamdiyo pe gehre gehre neel do/Dheere dheere saare khuddar khud hi maan jayenge/2018 hai desh ko khatra hai…Jingostan zindabad"*

("Catch them, beat them, slice them, rip their innocent skins/In a little while everyone self-reliant will convince themselves of it/It's 2018 and the country is in danger…long live Jingostan"). This is as close to a critique of authority as the film gets. In some cases, director Zoya Akhtar chose to utilize real-life examples of leftist anger as an aesthetic mood, while stripping it of its essential political identity. Consider, for example, the film's sampling of Chandigarh-based Punjabi rapper Dub Sharma's (who also authored "Jingostan") 2016 track "Azaadi" ("Freedom"). Sharma mixed his own Punjabi lyrics with the chants of student protestors at Jawaharlal Nehru University under the leadership of Kanhaiya Kumar, the president of the All India Student Federation who had been charged with sedition in 2016 for allegedly raising anti-India slogans in protest of the sexual abuse of Kashmiri women by members of the Indian army.[23] The original chants of Kumar and the JNU students, sampled by Sharma, were a searing indictment of casteism, right-wing communal politics, and capitalist oppression:

Azaadi!
Bhukhmari se
Sanghvaad se
Samantvaad se
Punjivaad se
Brahmanvaad se
Manuvaad se
Hum leke rahenge
Tum kuch bhi kar lo

Freedom
From hunger
From communal politics
From feudalism
From capitalism
From Brahmanism
From casteism
We'll go ahead and take it
So you try to do something

[23] The chant has its roots in the Kashmiri feminist movement, and was adapted by the JNU committee.

The video features images of the striking students being lathi-charged by the Delhi Police, as well as images of Dalit leader BR Ambedkar, the socialist national martyr Bhagat Singh, and most notably, images of Rohith Vemula, the Dalit research scholar at the University of Hyderabad who had committed suicide in protest of casteist discrimination in the university in January 2016. *Rohith Vemula Amar Rahe* ("Rohith Vemula Lives Forever") had been the slogan of the striking JNU students, and his death had set off a wave of anti-Modi, anti-BJP sentiment in students across India.

Alongside images of the striking students, dancers wearing masks with the faces of Narendra Modi, then-Education Minister Smriti Irani (who had claimed in 2014 that Dalit university students who protested against casteism had a "depraved mentality'), and Republic TV presenter and BJP surrogate Arnab Goswami dance gleefully, as if to celebrate the chaos present in the proceedings. The presence of these masked dancers also makes a clear point as to what the striking students, and by extension Sharma, seek to gain *azaadi* from. Sharma samples Irani's "depraved mentality" speech, a sudden interjection in the hopeful, pointed chants of the students and his own Punjabi lyrics, in which he likens himself to a bird in a gilded cage, breaking free as he will "no longer eat the food from your hands." Students riffed on the promises for *acche din* (good days) made by Modi's BJP, as well as the nationalistic economic schemes accompanying these promises; one protest sign mocked Modi's "Make in India" national economic scheme by pointing out that such promises of development are accompanied in a de facto sense by caste, religious, and gendered violence.[24]

[24] Rahul Gandhi, in what was probably the most fiery speech of his career, also used Make in India as a riff to expand on the increase in caste, gendered, and religious violence in BJP's India. Commenting on accusations of rape against a BJP parliamentarian in Uttar Pradesh, Gandhi said: "Narendra Modi ne kaha tha 'Make in India.' Kaha tha, na? Par ab aap jahan bhi dekho…'Make in India' nahin…ab hai 'Rape in India' jahan bhi dekho" ("Narendra Modi had talked about 'Make in India.' He did, didn't he? But now everywhere you look…it's not 'Make in India,' it's 'Rape in India' everywhere you look").

Sharma's rap is a declaration of working-class, Dalit, and Muslim/Christian self-awareness and solidarity, imagining a potential future where the accelerationist agenda of Modi's BJP, with the paternalistic gilded cage of neoliberal development, is rejected in favor of a new form of politics and social organization, in which the downtrodden "go ahead and take it," operating outside of the caste, communal, and gendered confines that mark liberal and neoliberal Indian politics. Sharma and the JNU students clearly demarcate the boundaries of what it is they are against, and who are the representatives of what they see as an oppressive middle-class, majoritarian politics. The use of Irani and Goswami are a particular protest against a genteel liberal politics that has sought to elide the machinations of caste, class, and communalism; after Vemula's suicide, Irani condemned the "politicization" of Vemula's death, remarking that as the wife of a religious minority (her husband is Parsi) she was uniquely qualified to speak on issues of caste and communalism and that she was enraged by those who were "busy trying to use the death of a *bachcha* (child) as a political weapon…I see this case as the death of a child and not as the death of a Dalit."[25] Goswami went even further, arguing in 2017 on his show *Newshour* that it was wrong for left-wing politicians and activists to take up Vemula's case because Vemula had lied about being a Dalit, concluding that "it was not to do with politics…it was to do with personal reasons." This was a sharp turn from Goswami's 2016 reporting immediately after Vemula's suicide, in which he had discussed how Vemula was bullied by university officials and local MLAs because of his anti-caste organizing.

"Azaadi" was reused for *Gully Boy* in a sequence depicting the frustration of its young characters, albeit with significantly altered and expanded lyrics. It was presented in *Gully Boy* thus:

[25] At the time of his death, Vemula was 26 years old.

Azaadi!
Bhukhmari se
Bhedbhav se
Pachhvaad se
Hum leke rahenge
Tum kuch bhi kar lo

Freedom
From hunger
From oppression
From bribery
We'll go ahead and take it
So you try to do something

While Sharma's original track only includes the JNU chants and his own Punjabi lyrics, the *Gully Boy* track includes some original Hindi lyrics written especially for the film by DIVINE, which once again take on a slightly less pointed accusatory tone:

Haan bahut baithe chhup chaap
Kya ghanta ka "insaaf"
Desh kaise hoga saaf?
Inki niyat mein hai daag
Sirf karte rahenge baat
Alag shakal wohi jaat
Vote milne par yeh khaas
Phir gayab poore saal
"Haan mera bhai hai toh"

Yes, we've been shut up for too long
To hell with "justice"
How will the country be clean?
There's dirt in their intentions
They'll keep on speechifying
Different face but same ideas
You're special until you cast your vote
Then they're invisible the rest of the year
"Yes, yes, you're my brother."

What, precisely, is this an indictment of? One might see a connection between the rage expressed in Gully Boy's track and the sentiment expressed in DIVINE's earlier "Mere Gully Mein"—the dissatisfaction felt by the urban poor about their continuing exploitation by

obsequious politicians. *"Azaadi*" in *Gully Boy* openly condemns the *saala mantri* ("asshole politician") who relies on the maintenance of electoral blocs to retain his power, and otherwise leaves the *bastis* to be exploited by the police and business interests.

Yet these lyrics might be read in a different way; rather than reflecting the rage of the urban poor, channeled into Dalit and anti-communal leftist movements, *"Azaadi"* represents and speaks for the developing rage of the urban middle classes as captured by the novelist Rana Dasgupta (2014)—the sense that the new post-liberalization world "felt oddly uniform and, indeed, sleazy: just more profits for the same corrupt gang." Changing the pointed and politically charged words of the original JNU protests—words like *sanghvaad* ("communal politics"), *brahmanvaad* ("Brahminism"), and *punjivaad* ("capitalism")—to broader and less specific words like *bhedbhav* ("oppression") and *pachhvad* ("bribery") strips the chant of its specific condemnation of right-wing Hindutva politics, and more broadly its condemnation of the joint forces of government and media that maintain cycles of caste-based and class-based oppression that continue to draw the boundaries of the lives of India's urban poor. Furthermore, the film's visuals during the *"Azaadi"* sequence reinforce oppression as a matter of individual experience, rather than that of structural circumstance. Murad, his mother, and his younger brother have left their family home following an intense argument between Murad and his father over his father's second wife; they are living in an unheated one-room flat while Murad works unhappily in his maternal uncle's air conditioning firm. Safeena, who has gotten in trouble with the police and her parents for hitting her romantic rival Shweta over the head with a beer bottle in Mumbai's tony Parsi restaurant Sodabottleopenerwala, is under threat of being removed from her medical college studies and forcibly married off to a boy of her parents' choice. The two of them proceed through the quotidian boredom of their lives—Murad answering phones in his cubicle, Safeena

serving snacks and tea to an endless parade of prospective in-laws—while *"Azaadi"* plays in the background. Both Murad and Safeena seek freedom from their individual circumstances that prevent their self-improvement and self-fulfillment, but the structures that prevent this self-fulfillment are largely relegated to parental and family structures—Murad's need to please his uncle for his mother and younger brother's sake, Safeena's need to pacify her domineering mother and placate her effeminate, obsequious father.

The Muslim male body, and the gendered experience of Muslimness amongst the urban poor, hangs heavy over the film. Murad's physical characterization hearkens to typical *filmi* representations of the urban young Muslim man; he wears *kajal* around his eyes and a *ta'awiz* amulet, not unlike other representations of young Muslim men, such as Rishi Kapoor in *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), Shahrukh Khan in *Raees* (2017), and Ranveer Singh himself as the avaricious Muslim king Alauddin Khilji in *Padmaavat* (2018). The film's meta-commentary on the gaze of the wealthy towards the Muslim urban poor is transnational; the Ahmeds make extra cash by allowing foreign "slum tourists' into their home to take pictures. In one scene, American tourists photograph Murad's semi-nude body as his lies on his bed, and he puts a hand in front of his face to protect his modesty and anonymity (Moments later, he stuns the tourists with his knowledge of Nas' "N.Y. State of Mind"). Murad's body is not just Muslim, but it is also poor; control over one's body and who views and uses it, it is implied, belongs solely to the rich. Murad's body is put through a series of unwanted activities and actions; he is forced to moonlight as a driver after his father breaks his leg; his body becomes an object of sexual fascination for upper-class Hindu Shweta as well as for his young stepmother; he must occupy the bodily habitus of a typical middle-class office worker to support his mother and brother. Women's bodies are also treated the same way; middle-class Muslim women in the film, such as

Safeena and her mother, are universally *hijabis;* poor women have their dupattas ripped off, are photographed indiscriminately by white men, and are either abused or sexually exploited by their male relatives. Murad's body is both hypersexualized and desexualized. In Shweta's and his stepmother's desire for Murad's Muslim body, Hindu anxieties about the sensuality of the male Muslim body, and the sexual vitality of Muslim men are reflected (Stewart 2020, Tyagi & Sen 2019, Anand 2007, Banerjee 2006, Blom Hansen 1996); at the same time, the poverty of Murad's body, and the *majboori* (helplessness) of his circumstances seem to desexualize him, giving him less bodily autonomy. Perhaps it is this act of stripping Murad of his adult autonomy that makes him a more palatable and relatable Muslim hero for caste Hindu viewers.

There is also a strong class differentiation between Murad and Safeena that is rarely remarked upon in the movie; Safeena is the daughter of a doctor who works in an NGO-based clinic in Dharavi. Unlike the other girls and young women featured in the movie, she studies full-time rather than works; her reaction to her mother's demand that she give up her studies and marry is very similar to the reaction I witnessed amongst middle-class girls in Jaipur, which was ambivalence about the end of her self-improvement and her *fursat* (free time) in favor of the domestic drudgeries and demands of marriage. Even worse is the implication that Safeena might be married off to someone like Murad's father, who stands in as representative of the worst of stereotypes of Muslim masculinity; he is sexually licentious (keeping his younger second wife virtually imprisoned in their bedroom), abusive to his first wife and their children, and fanatic about his eldest son's obedience to the strictures of orthodox Islam. The worst excesses of Murad's father are supported by his own mother, Murad's *dadijaan,* to whom Murad remarks sarcastically when she asks him why he will not take her with him when e abandons the household: "Have your son look after you, since you have raised him so nobly." Murad's mother,

whom he describes as *meri fauji* ("my warrior") is a silent, suffering witness to the abuses of his father.

It is Murad's father, Aftab Shakir, who provides the identitarian framework against which *Gully Boy* takes its final stand. In the last third of the film, Murad returns from being selected for the final round of Nas' competition and is immediately castigated by his father, who angrily advises him not to shoot too high: *"Naukar log toh hum hain, na? Tu kaun hai? Kaun hai?"* ("But we are the servant class, aren't we? Who are you? Who are *you?")* Murad counters with his Youtube popularity, saying: "*Char lakh logon se zyada is video dekh liye. 'Thank you' bol rahe hain, 'shukriya' bole, 'ki tum ne hum jaisi ki zindagi ke upar ek gaana banaya' Is ko kuch matlab hai. Logon ko farq padta isse. Log video dekhenge mehsoos karenge. Is ko qadar hai. Mera qadar hai."* ("More than 4 lakh people saw this video. They're saying, 'Thank you, thank you, that you made a song about the lives of people like us.' It has meaning. It makes a difference to people. People will watch it, they'll feel something. It has value. I have value"). Realizing for the first time how vast the chasm between him and his son has grown, Aftab Shakir explains himself: *"Dekh, beta. Hum jaise log ki vaastav zindagi itna asan nahin hai. Kitni baar tere ko samjha? Apne munh par neeche chalna."* ("Listen, my child. The reality of life for people like us isn't that easy. How many times have I told you? Walk with your head down"). "Is this our fate?" Murad wonders aloud, at which Aftab Shakir bursts into tears, finally revealing to his son the totality of his pain: "*Yeh jhoot nahin hai. Tere se zyaada chand raat dekha hum ne. Tere ko wohi sikhaya jo main sikha hai"* ("This is not a lie. I've seen more nights than you have. I have only taught you what I have learned"). Murad refuses his father's advice, and in the film's final scene, Aftab Shakir, now reconciled with his wife and child, watches Murad open for Nas with an expression of childlike wonder.

Aftab Shakir is portrayed by Vijay Raaz, a veteran character actor who has played primarily working-class roles; tall, lanky, malnourished-looking, and drawn,[26] Raaz's physicality embodies one of the many masses of downtrodden bodies that make up India's working minority poor.[27] Aftab Shakir's perception of the boundaries of working-class Muslim life are far more circumscribed; informed, perhaps, by a lifetime of social and physical violence. If the Ahmeds are native Mumbaikars, they may have survived the 1992 riots, in which the Shiv Sena, a Hindu nationalist and Maratha chauvinist party that would surely be familiar to MC Sher and his family, participated in and facilitated rioting against the city's Muslims in retaliation for the preservation of Babri Masjid, and where Muslim-majority slums were some of the hardest hit (Blom Hansen 2001). If they are (as it is implied) migrants, from Uttar Pradesh or Gujarat, they may have come to Mumbai after fleeing from one of the numerous anti-Muslim riots those states suffered in the mid-late 1980s. In any case, Aftab Shakir's fears about the danger of being a young Muslim man who aspires are grounded in a long history of caste- and communal-related violences enacted upon minorities across India; from the Bhotmange family murders discussed in Chapter Two to the deliberate attacks on middle-class Muslim homes in Ahmedabad during the 1985 riots (Shani 2007) and in Jaipur during the 1992 Babri Masjid riots (Mayaram 1992). Trauma, which is never fully explored, hangs over the lives of the Ahmed family, and is implied to be at the root of Aftab Shakir's rage toward his upwardly mobile son. Yet, in Murad's

[26] Raaz himself comes from a middle-class Uttar Pradesh family; he has written about disappointing his father by choosing to become an actor rather than to "put his B.Comm to good use" through a government or private business job. Indian film and media magazines like *Filmfare* and *Film Companion* often use phrases like "outsider," "awkward," and "rough-around-the-edges" especially because he often speaks in Hindi and with a pronounced Uttar Pradesh accent.

[27] One of Raaz's first mainstream roles was in Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2000) in which he played the planner, PK Dubey, of the titular large Punjabi wedding. Hopelessly in love with the family's Christian maid, in one scene Dubey watches through a window as the maid puts on the bridal jewelry belonging to the daughter of the household, who is to be married, and "plays" at being a bride herself. The romantic idyll is interrupted when Dubey's workers loudly enter the scene and accuse the maid of stealing. Dreaming of romance and a bourgeois companionate marriage, it is implied, is a luxury not given to the poor.

outburst, it is clear that the film views Aftab Shakir's concerns as essentially misguided and without merit. Endemic poverty and cycles of communal violence are not alleviated by structural change; rather, they are alleviated through individual striving and what can only be characterized as pluck. Liberation, for Murad as well as other characters, is not dependent on achieving middle-class or upper-middle-class consumption patterns, but is largely dependent upon casting off their parents' identity-based traumatic baggage. For the female characters, this is especially on the nose—in the film's final scene, where Murad performs "*Apna time aayega"* for a cheering crown, Safeena (who has snuck out of her parents' house to attend the concert) triumphantly tears off her *hijab* and adorns her lips with bright lipstick, taking on a different valence of Muslim femininity. Safeena's actions represent not only a repudiation of the orthodox Islam of her mother and its accompanying gender roles, but the political dimensions of South Asian Islam that mark a *hijabi* as especially political, especially concerned with a Muslim consciousness.[28]

The film also does not criticize the structures of the state that enact violence specifically against Muslims and the poor. In one scene, Murad's friend Moeen, a petty thief, is arrested for stealing cars to strip for parts; Murad is almost arrested alongside him. In the film's first scene, Murad and Moeen are seen, in fact, stealing cars for parts; what might be framed as a commentary on presumptions of Muslim criminality, and the violence enacted by the police upon Muslims, is instead reflective of Murad's individual choice to "become better" that his petty criminal social group in Dharavi.[29] Rather than structural injustices, Murad's path to success is plagued by individuals who, through their own criminality, religious prejudice, or identitarian self-consciousness, are unable to overcome their upbringing and succeed. This view was

[28] I am grateful to Huma Ahmed-Ghosh for her thoughts on the political dimensions of hijab amongst young women in urban India.
[29] This is later reinforced when Murad chastises Moeen for hiring small orphan boys to run his errands and pack up his drugs; at the end of the film, Murad starts a fund to send the boys to school.

reflected in a statement made to me by the father of a Rajput family of my acquaintance in Delhi, regarding the proprietor of his favorite *pān* stall: "He is a Muslim, and what does he do every day? He doesn't think Kashmir this or Kashmir that. He gets up, eats breakfast, gets on his scooty, and goes to work. He just works. Our Indian Muslims are like that." A progressive Muslim in the age of Modi, it is alleged, does not dwell on how being Muslim, or being poor, poses its own particular challenges, but rather merely succeeds in spite of himself.

This view of "our Indian Muslims" is reflected in other current films, like *Sooryavanshi* (2020), *Delhi 6* (2009) and *Raazi* (2018), in which Muslims insist on identifying as Indians first, and Muslims second. Diminishment of religious and caste concerns is not especially coincidental. The Hindi film industry, seizing on the cultural moment after Modi's landslide election in 2014, has played a vital role in disseminating Modi's message to the world. While the Hindi film industry has always been closely tied to state interests (Deprez 2013, Mazzarella 2013), with film-world entities like the Central Board of Film Censorship serving as wings of the state's cultural power, Modi's tenure in power in particular has proved enormously productive for mainstream Bollywood filmmakers. Films like *Toilet: ek prem katha* (*Toilet: a love story,* 2017) and *Dangal* (*The wrestler,* 2017) bring awareness to the Modi governments social welfare schemes like Swachh Bharat (Clean India) and Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save and Educate the Girl Child) while military action films like *Uri: The surgical strike* (2019) praise the government's decisive military actions against Pakistan; in *Uri*'s case, the "surgical strike" of 2016 in which India fired missiles across the Line of Control into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir in retaliation of the killing of nineteen servicemen in the town of Uri in India-occupied Kashmir. This film's most famous dialogue, in which actor Vicky Kaushal, as platoon leader Vishaal Singh Shergill, repeatedly asks his men "How's the *josh?"* ("How's the morale?") took on a life

of its own, appearing on t-shirts and in memes alongside *Apna time aayega.* After the film's release, videos circulated of formation leaders in the Indian Navy and Army asking their men "How's the *josh?"* with regularity. One could ask "how's the *josh?"* to a student preparing for exams, to a tired coworker, or to fellow passengers on a bus. During Holi 2019, members of the Rathod family mounted a "war" against the neighbors living across the street, a Marwari Jain family who had a prominent place in the state BJP. Calling themselves "India" and the neighboring family "Pakistan," the Rathod men dragged the neighboring family's men and boys into the street and doused them with water and paint in a mock border war; an uncle of the Rathod family riled his "troops" up by frequently screaming "How's the *josh!?"* The game eventually ended in injury when Sukhi Rathod was dragged by one of his arms down the street, tearing his shirt from his body and leaving him with bruises and scratches across his shoulder and chest.

Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt, who respectively played Murad and his girlfriend Safeena, have appeared frequently with Modi, visiting him in Delhi with "delegations" of other young stars. Some of these stars are well-known for their "progressive" attitudes towards social issues in India, and for their commitment to playing roles in films that take up serious questions of gender, sexuality, and caste. Singh and Bhatt, for example, visited Modi in January 2019 accompanied by Ayushmann Khurrana, a three-time Filmfare Award recipient whose debut film cast him as a sperm donor, and whose most recent films have taken up issues of menopausal "surprise" pregnancies, erectile dysfunction, phone sex, caste murders, and gay relationships and marriage.

The tightly-knit relationship between Modi and the film industry became even more apparent when Akshay Kumar, the charismatic action hero who had starred in such socially-

minded films as *Toilet: ek prem katha, Mission Mangal* (on the launching of the Mangalyaan Mars orbiter) and *Padman* (about menstrual hygiene) was given the task of interviewing Modi at the Prime Minister's residence in Delhi for the Hindustan Times. Describing the interview as "non-political," Kumar sat with Modi in a relaxed pose on a verandah, asking the Prime Minister questions like "*Kya pradhanmantri aam khaate hain?"* ("Does the Prime Minister eat mangoes?") and *Narendra Modiji ko jab zukaam lagta hai tab kya karte hain?* ("What does Narendra Modiji do when he catches a cold?") Modi, for his part, laughed and chuckled his way through the softball interview; Modi, who often comes across as stiff and dour, took on a new role not as the seasoned celibate (though married) RSS *pracharak*, but as something approaching a family man, or at least a kindly bachelor uncle.

The advantage that the interview provided to both parties was not lost on veteran film and cultural critic Shobhaa De, who wrote:

> Why was Akshay picked for this assignment? Why not Vivek Oberoi? Anupam Kher? Any other loyalist? Why not one of the three Khans? Now that would have been a major coup. But why would the Khans do something as dicey? They are far too smart to get into hot water with their fan base. Money be damned. Aha - Mr. Modi likes to take people by surprise. Stealth attacks suit his style far more than a straight up approach. Besides, let's face it - Akshay is a big enough star, who has passed the loyalty test with flying colours. Take a look at his past few films ('Padman', 'Gold'). They are brilliant examples of political messaging packaged as entertainment. When I watched 'Toilet - Ek Prem Katha', I was impressed by the shrewdness of the theme.

Writing in Scroll.in, Santosh Kumar, an advocate in the Supreme Court of India, saw in the interview an accurate reflection of the nature of contemporary Indian politics, and writes that "the showmanship of the BJP has left economic and political analysts dumbfounded…politicians have always used theatre. But the Modi government is different. It has created possibly the longest-running feature film of all time. Many news channels have selflessly offered their prime-time slots under media partnerships to promote this mega movie. Social media provides the

sound effect with dialogues true and false blaring from all sides" (Kumar, "Lights, Camera, Action!")

Actors like Akshay Kumar and Khurrana, whose specialties are "social" films and especially politically progressive roles, indicate the marriage of middle-class rage politics and emergent social progressivism. Gender empowerment, LGBT rights, public health, and scientific advancement are married to films which relegate issues of caste and religious difference to the realm of "superstition" or "anti-progressivism." In the film *Sooryavanshi* (2020) Kumar plays a member of a Mumbai Police anti-terrorism task force who introduces his Muslim colleagues as "Indians first, Muslims second" to a suspected Pakistani spy, and in *Article 15* (2019) Khurrana, as a Brahmin police officer investigating caste-based murders in a rural district of Uttar Pradesh, castigates Dalit villagers for "caring about these ancient divisions…aren't we living in modern times?" The implementation of some progressive values, particularly around gender and sexuality, allows for what Jasbir Puar (2013) has referred to as "pinkwashing"—the use of some progressive ideals to "recover" other forms of structural oppression, such as religious or caste-based discrimination. The specter of "radical Islam" as an oppressive force, invoked by Hindu nationalists since Partition (Mehta 2015, Menon 2012, Sreenivasan 2007, Menon 2005, Baccheta 2004, Kovacs 2004, Mazumdar 1995), along with the destabilizing forces of Dalit self-organization, become foils against which the "progressive right-wing" might organize. The nominally progressive film industry, exemplified by films like *Gully Boy,* diminish the importance of structural change for the empowerment of minorities in favor of a model that leads to suspicion of minority organizing and a diminishment of organizational power.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUBVERSIVE DESIRES

Was every longing and desire that my interlocutors had in the service of a Hindu nationalist politics? Or were there some desires that were trickier in how they played themselves out in women's lives? As time passed over the course of my fieldwork, I heard women express feelings that were sometimes outside of, or moreover had no place in, the middle-class nationalist politics I have previously discussed. Various moments, conversations, and events demonstrated how women often, even if briefly or in secret, expressed subversive desires around sexuality, relationship-building, and self-determination. While many of these desires were radical in their conception and scope, they usually did not correspond to a substantive radical politics. Rather, their ephemerality suggested a future yet to be determined, a world yet to come.

In this chapter, I ask: what are the wild imaginings my interlocutors conjured, and what do they suggest about the tensions and limitations of the Hindu nationalist political imaginary itself? In previous chapters, I have discussed the realm of desire as it is sublimated to a nationalist project. Yet the desires that women articulated to themselves, to each other, and to me frequently transgressed what they identified as the boundaries limiting Hindu nationalist women's imaginings. These boundaries consisted especially of those that limited sexuality, gender expression, domestic relations in the household, and delineation of caste hierarchies. Such boundaries, key to the social formation of Hindu nationalism, were not brought down by such imaginings, but were revealed to not have solidified their hold over middle-class sociality. The intrusion of not only desire, but also pleasure, troubled ideas of the nationalist family, the role of married and unmarried women within it, and conjured brief images of alternative lifeworlds? In the following chapter, I discuss several major events that occurred in the Rathod

and Singh households that illustrate the "wild imaginaries" of Hindu nationalist women, and suggest that, despite their lack of political force, they demonstrate the possibility of a radical politics, and the construction of an alternative lifeworld. I also ask—why did these wild imaginaries not lead to the constitution of a radical or resistant politics amongst my interlocutors, despite their alternative and transgressive imaginings? It is exactly this open-ended potential that recovers these moments as troubling to the Hindu nationalist political imaginary—they as of yet lack momentum, but illustrate cracks in the armor, so to speak, in which contrary ideas, identities, and positions take up space in the Hindu nationalist home.

Oh, To Be in Love: Sex, Intimacy, and Subversion

Anthropologists have identified the paradoxical function of subversion in regulating social upheaval. Festivals like the medieval European *carnivale,* the Hindu festival of Holi, or the contemporary American Halloween provide an opportunity for revelers to indulge in play that subverts or transcends class, gender, or sexual boundaries. Yet, as Gluckman (1956) suggests, such rituals are not in and of themselves subversive; they take place within the realm of sanctioned social activity and serve a social purpose. Bawdy songs sung by women at marriages and puberty festivals,[30] for example, or the sexual joking and casual drug use associated with Holi celebrations in Jaipur, sanction behavior and language that is normally not acceptable, but becomes acceptable through the mechanics of the ritual process. Victor Turner (1969) further expands on the purpose of such rituals, making it clear that they are designed to deal with

[30] For an early collection of these songs, see Bryce (1936). Marriages are often the site of permissible sexual innuendo and joking, both at the expense of the newlywed couple and the attendees. Even in the most conservative weddings, people may sing and dance to raucous Hindi and Rajasthani music, some of which is more overt than others. Consider the lyrics of a Bollywood folk-style song, written by the venerable lyricist A.R. Rahman, that was widely played at weddings in Jaipur in the early winter of 2022: "*Palang toota pehli raat/saara mohalla karta awaaz/hui chaubare mein barsaat/kaun wahan tha kiske saath"* ("The bed was broken on the very first night/The whole neighborhood began to gossip/Rain poured down into the streets /Who was in there, and with who?")

liminality, or ambiguous states of being, by safely ferrying ambiguous bodies over to the other side, into a more secure personhood. Marriage, puberty rituals, funerals, and subversive holidays all serve to strengthen and reinforce social life and social bonds (*communitas)* even as they provide an outlet for such play. Yet, Turner also reminds us, *communitas* holds an "aspect of potentiality; it is often in the *subjunctive* mood" (1969:372). Liminality and the affect it produces not only reinforce existing boundaries, but have the potential to create new ones; as humans navigate what it means to live and function with one another, new ways of being together may arise that challenge structural foundations in favor of ever-growing 'humankindness.' Such affects, Turner claims, go beyond the legal and political; "art and religion," he says, "are their products" (ibid.).

I find such thinking useful in understanding the role of the subversive amongst my interlocutors, as they most often articulated subversive desires within spaces that were deemed appropriate for these desires to be expressed. Most common were all-female spaces, such as gatherings between female relatives and ritual meetings during the festivals of Holi, Gangaur, and Teej. These meetings were ripe with innuendo and joking, at the expense of the gathered women present and myself. I had encountered such women's spaces in the ethnography of Gloria Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold (1996), who conducted fieldwork in women's social meetings in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh and argue that it is exactly these spaces, and the sexual joking and play therein, that pose a "women's response" to the strictures of orthodox Brahminical patriarchy. Amongst each other, women may talk about sexual pleasure and desire openly, as well as form solidarity around mutual experience of domestic violence and marital strife. The cultivation of such spaces are nothing new in Indian life, but they do represent potential spaces of social critique and the formation of alternative selfhoods. Caroline Osella (2012) identifies the

women's spaces of Kerala Muslim families to be places where critiques of the neoliberal family form are mounted, for example, while for Rebecca Klenk's Uttarkhandi women (2012), women's gatherings around holidays and festivals lead to critiques of women's social welfare schemes implemented by NGOs and the government in the mountains and their creation of the specter of the "undeveloped" *Pahadi* woman.

Raheja and Gold's ethnography of Rajasthan limit these spaces to only middling caste women, writing that Rajput women did not engage in these holiday social meetings, implying that Rajput women are too allied to caste norms around sexuality to engage in such play. I perhaps had this assertion in mind when I found myself prudishly shocked during an evening in the small flat of Roop, a student at the University of Rajasthan who rented an upstairs room from the Rathods. Pooja was also present with me, along with a few other girls who lived in the complex. We began to discuss a male friend of mine who had recently come to Jaipur from his research site in the Himalayas to visit me for a few weeks. A flirtation had developed between us as we traipsed through the countryside, and I had cultivated a crush on him, glad to have the time together. When he dropped me off on his way to the train station, the girls stood at the gate, watching as we bid each other goodbye, and after he had left, some of them quizzed me about him. What had transpired between us as we visited the famous hill forts, the places where the romantic legends of Dhola-Maru and Rani Padmini had taken place?

"He's so handsome and tall!"

"Is he married?"

"Do you like him?"

"Where does he stay?"

"How do you know him?"

"What will happen when you both go home?"

Confronted with these questions, I suddenly found myself full of shyness, and could only say, like a film heroine, *"Mujhe ladka pasand hai"* ("I like the boy"). I explained that, regardless of how I felt about him, my friend would not make a suitable husband. "He's *jungli"* (wild), I said, explaining that he had a proclivity for driving too fast, smoking cigarettes, getting arrested at political protests, and watching indecent films. Then I covered my face with my hands, as I had seen many women in the house do when they felt shy or overwhelmed. I had been extraordinarily careful not to mention anything untoward about my romantic life when I sat around with the Rathod and Singh women. This was something that many Americans who had passed through the house had done; one woman who stayed in the Rathod house during my second trip there in the summer of 2017 had told Aarti that her husband was dead rather than confess to being a divorcée. None of this reservation was rooted in anything the Rathods or their renters had said, but in a kind of cultivation of a conception of Rajput *lajj* (modesty) necessary to being taken in as a kin-daughter. Movies like *Shuddh Desi Romance* (2013), *Parched* (2015), and *Padmaavat* (2018) emphasize the modesty and sex-negativity of Rajasthani culture to American viewers; stories of bride-burnings, *sati,* and seclusion accompany many external descriptions of Rajasthani life. Even the American Institute of Indian Studies handbook, used by hundreds of young American students in India each year, advises women in Jaipur to remain modestly dressed, avoid discussing matters of sexuality or love, and to shun flirtation or

flirtatious joking.[31] I perhaps had all of this in mind when I downplayed the crush, acting ashamed and embarrassed rather than how I really felt, dizzy with potential.

Upon witnessing my display, Roop cracked up laughing, accompanied by peals of giggling from the other girls. "Don't you remember what Panditji said to you?" she asked. A few months before, a *jyotish,* or astrologer, had been called to the house to read each woman's natal chart and make predictions about our futures; questions about future husbands figured prominently in the charts of all the unmarried girls and women. The astrologer had proclaimed to me that my eventual marriage would be happy, but that my husband would be socially unacceptable; he would drink and smoke, but be considerate of me in every way. Perhaps my freewheeling friend, Roop suggested, was who the astrologer had been talking about. "Send his natal chart to us first, and we'll tell you how it will be. If it's good, you can call him to you, and see what happens," she guffawed. "You know what the pandit said—he'll be considerate in *every* way." She wiggled her eyebrows at me, clearly being suggestive.

"If you don't like him, take an Indian husband," Pooja added with delight. "You can have more than one—one in America, one in India. *Ek gora, ek kala le lo* (take a fair one and a dark one). *Toh is mein problem kya hai?"* (so what's the problem in this?) It was not the first time I had heard such talk from women from a broad swathe of economic, regional, and class positions.

[31] The AIIS handbook on sexual and romantic conduct in India is divided into sections that presume a binary readership of cis, heterosexual American men and women, with a separate section for "LGBTQ identities." While both men and women are advised as to appropriate romantic and sexual conduct, both amongst themselves and with local people, women are given special advisement as to dress, traveling solo, and interactions with local men. They are generally advised to avoid eye contact or conversations with local men who they do not know, to dress modestly in salwar-kameez and kurtas, and to avoid traveling alone, especially on interstate trains and buses. Men are advised to eschew romantic and sexual relationships with local women, particularly daughters of neighborhood families, and not to visit female friends, American or Indian, in their flats alone. The AIIS guidebook has powerfully shaped the behavior of many women scholars in India, and has in my own thinking influenced problems of equity in anthropological scholarship in India. Anecdotally, women scholars are far more likely to heed these rules than men—one male American colleague, who prided himself on his ease of access to his research sites facilitated through rituals of smoking and drinking with local men, characterized my refusal to engage in sexual relationships with local men or travel alone with male strangers as proof of my timidness as a scholar, and suggested it would be detrimental to my career. The gendered question of access, conditioning, and propriety, was never considered.

Jyoti, who swept the hallways in the apartment building where I habitually stayed on research trips to Delhi, had made a similar joke about my relationships with men when she encountered my friend sleeping on the couch in the flat I shared with another researcher. Gesturing to his sleeping form on the couch, she had winked at me and said, "*Shaadi se pehle enjoy kar lo"* ("Enjoy yourself before you get married").

While these jokes were sometimes made in the context of my status as an American woman, who was assumed to freely enjoy romantic and sexual relationships with men regardless of how often I protested to the contrary, women often joked about their own sexualities and the sexualities of other women they knew. There was an element of delight that women seemed to feel in my shock; while the Rathod women and their friends spoke approvingly of my being *seedhi-saadhi* (simple and straightforward) and my self-conscious attempts to behave in a quiet, modest way. I sometimes visited with a friend, Swati, who lived in the near suburb of Sanganer with her grandmother, who we all called Nanisa ("Grandma"). She was the conservative, devoutly religious widow of a famously straight-laced local IAS officer, well-known in the neighborhood for his good conduct. Nanisa continued to observe strict seclusion in her widowhood, and spent most of her time sitting in my friend's living room knitting pairs of wool socks, praying on her *mala* beads, or watching Hindi-language serials on TV. Her adherence to ideals of modesty was well-known—she was famous for shouting at neighborhood girls if she spotted them talking to a boy over the gate or leaving the house without a dupatta—but she often made playful, transgressive comments about sex and sexuality. Nanisa and I liked each other, and I sometimes came to visit, read to her, and talk with her to practice my Marwari. One evening, as I sat with her and read the *Rajasthan Patrika* aloud, she sighed, looking at a picture of the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, whose face was emblazoned across the front

page. “Isn’t he too handsome?” she asked, winking at me. “*Use dekh ke aisa mehsoos ki aag lagi hai andar”* (“I look at him, and it feels like there’s a fire burning inside me”). My face colored bright red, and she laughed.

Nanisa may have felt more room to make these kinds of sexual remarks; Sucheta Mazumdar (2015) has commented on the relative liberatory power that wealthy widows wield in formulating late-in-life forms of transgressive self-expression, as in the case of Vijayaraje Scindia, the royal widow who later became a BJP parliamentarian. Yet Nanisa also made comments that went beyond the kind of sexual humor that has its time and place in Indian social life, and said things that also made claim to radical reimaginings of the relationship between everyday sexuality, affection, and the nationalist state.

Swati and her cousin went together to see the film *Ek ladki ko dekha to aisa laga* (“I felt like this when I saw the girl,” 2019), which was written by the trans filmmaker Gazal Dhaliwal and focuses on the romantic relationship between two women (Sonam K Ahuja and Regina Cassandra). They came home from the movie late in the evening, clearly titillated and scandalized. “How was it?” Nanisa asked.

“Nanisa, it was too funny. The movie—it was about lesbians,” Swati’s guffawed. Swati’s mother clicked her tongue while Nanisa asked “*Par ‘lesbian’ toh kya hai?”* (“but what’s a lesbian?”)

“Ek ladki dusri se shaadi karne chahti hai” (“It’s a girl that wants to marry another girl”), Swati’s cousin explained, still giggling.

Nanisa considered this for a moment, then shrugged, saying *“Achchi baat hai. Shaadi karne do”* (“That’s okay. Let them get married”). She displayed none of the shock or titillation of her young relatives.

What do all of the comments made by my women interlocutors—Roop and Pooja's fantasies of premarital sex and multiple husbands, Nanisa's frank expression of sexual desire for a public figure, and her further comment about the potential for same-sex marriage in India—suggest about tensions between actually existing sexual and gender relations and the gendered sociality propagated by Hindu nationalist political imaginaries? In all of the cases, the sex imagined is non-reproductive—premarital sex for the sole purpose of *mazaa* ("enjoyment"), the sexuality of elderly widows, queer sex. It is sex that is sometimes associated with violence upon the bodies of women and queer people—see, for example, the thrashing of unmarried couples in pubs by members of the Shri Ram Sena in Mangalore in 2009, and the hanging suicide of twenty-one-year-old Anjana Hareesh, following a program of forced conversion therapy instituted by her parents after she came out to them as gay. For this reason, it is also sex that occupies a somewhat ambiguous space in the Rajput home. In usual discussions of marriage and sexuality that happened in usual mixed-gender, mixed-age environments, sex was strictly relegated within the realm of marriage. There had never been any suggestion that any married women I spoke with had ever had sexual partners outside of marriage, nor that any sexual activity had occurred prior to marriage. Even the suggestion of sexual impropriety was stamped out quickly, and when it appeared, it was often accompanied with significant anxiety and fear, as in the case of Pooja's fear in Chapter One that her father would kill her if he caught her flirting with men online.

At the same time, the suggestion of sexual impropriety and its enjoyment were frequently invoked around me; discussions of extramarital affairs, polyamory (*ek gora, ek kala le lo),* and sexual attraction frequently came up around me, seemingly specifically to shock. Nanisa had clocked me as *sharmili* (reserved); this adjective has gendered connotations in Hindi, often used

to describe an appropriately modest young woman of marriageable age. My own natural personality—shy, retiring, homebody-ish—translated easily into the cultural paradigm of *sharmili* and *laaj* (modesty), which in turn both eased my access into Rajput women's spaces and made me something of a target of affectionate ridicule. Divya loved to do impressions of me, speaking in a high-pitched, demure voice, her hands fluttering to her face as she pulled an imaginary dupatta over her hair: *"Aunty main jati hoon"* ("Aunty, I'm going"), "*Aunty ghar aa rahi hoon,"* ("Aunty, I'm coming home"), "*Aunty main bahar khana loon,"* ("Aunty, I'm going out to dinner"). Even my clothes—the AIIS-handbook standard of salwar kameez or kurta—could be the subject of teasing. "Oh! Look at how you're dressed! We thought you were too good to wear jeans," Aarti once exclaimed, while looking through an album of photos I had brought from the US.

This dimension of humor—playful, affectionate sexual joking at the expense of an overcautious white woman—resembles what Shankar Ramaswami (2006) has termed "proletarian *mazaak* (humor, joking)." Ramaswami's fieldwork on humor amongst industrial migrant workers in Delhi made visible the potentiality of sexual humor to question and resist oppressive structural forces; jokes around masturbation, homoerotic desires, the wiliness of wives and girlfriends, and premarital and extramarital affairs carry with them a commentary on actually existing social relations for poor migrants—alienation, compulsion, powerlessness, and bodily weakness—that could serve as subtle forms of resistant speech for those who understood them. I came to think of the *mazaak* around sex and love that emerged amongst my women interlocutors as a kind of subtle resistant speech of its own. Joking about extramarital and premarital sex challenged the normative conceptions of the high-caste Hindu family, in which the desires of all members, particularly women, are sublimated to the will first of family

grouping and secondarily to the Hindu state, which prioritizes the development and preservation of the normative Hindu family. Like any human being, the desires of women members of these families are more unruly; the joking that accompanies discussions of these desires do not take away from the fact that these are women's (queer?) dreamings, which deprioritize the reproductive concerns of the state in favor of "mere" unabashed pleasure. Such joking at my expense also inverts the Orientalist assumptions about Indian women's sexuality that color many anthropological and sociological studies on Indian gender and sexual norms; by framing me as the reserved, *sharmili* unmarried girl dying for a husband and themselves as the unruly, sexually liberated progressives (in reality, we were all somewhere in between), they questioned normative anthropological considerations that view Indian sexuality, particularly women's sexuality, as disengaged, repressed, and adherent to cisheteronormative, monogamous norms.

In fact, discourses of sex and love could be used to challenge assumptions around caste and religious relations. Even as women espoused their allegiance to caste and religious norms prescribed by the Hindu nationalist state, their actually existing relationships and dreamings were far different. I turn to two specific examples—Pooja Rathod's rejection of a marriage proposal in July 2019, and the all-India obsession with the Pakistani actor Fawad Khan—to illustrate the slippery effect of these existing and potential relationships to challenge the state's familial dynamics.

Fawad Khan Meets The Apple King: Desires Beyond Religion and Caste

Late into my time in Jaipur, a proposal arrived for Pooja from a wealthy Rajput family from the northern state of Himachal Pradesh. The family, which held a princely title, owned thousands of acres of land, mostly orchards in which they grew the highly prized Himachali

apples, which are some of the most sought-after fruits in India. We informally began to refer to the boy as *Seb ka Raja,* The Apple King, partially as an acknowledgment of the family's high status and partially to tease Pooja, who seemed as if, after two years of stonewalling, she might be considering the proposal after all. The family was unique from many of the other families in the Rathods' social circle—the boy's mother worked outside the home as a teacher, and she and her husband were open to allowing Pooja to continue her legal studies and work after marriage. This was different from Ashok's family, who had wanted Janaki to stop working; this was a fairly typical demand for the Rajput families I knew in Jaipur. Outwardly, the proposal from the Apple King was everything that Pooja had imagined when she had thought about her future husband—he was well-educated, handsome, progressive, and wealthy enough to allow her access to the aspirational lifestyle she dreamed of when she scrolled through her Instagram feed. She began to imagine, openly, what it might be like to be married, and the kinds of things that she could do if she were the Apple Queen. Once, while she and I were walking together through a gourmet grocery store, buying chocolate for a birthday party, we passed by beautiful-looking, rose-red Himachali and Kashmiri apples. As I eyed them appreciatively, Pooja laughed and said, "Don't buy those. When I'm the Apple Queen, I'll send you a whole crate, for free."

Still, she had reservations. The reservations were not the same that she had had for the other proposals—she was not concerned about restrictions on her freedom or on her ability to work, and she trusted that the Apple King was worldly enough to appreciate her own worldliness. The romance of mountainous Himachal Pradesh sounded exciting, and the move would disconnect her from many of the aspects of life in Jaipur that she found smothering. Yet she could not get over the fact that, when she looked at the photograph of the Apple King that was included in his biodata, she felt nothing. The most she could muster when asked about what

she, personally, thought of him, was *"Achcha sa lagta hai"* ("He seems nice"). The preparation for the meeting of the two families—bringing the Apple King down from Himachal, consulting astrologers, checking lineages—largely went on without her input. In the evening, she shut her door and locked it, begging off of socializing in favor of studying for her upcoming exams—which she usually hated to do—and painting her nails various colors. "I don't know what's wrong with that girl," Dev Pratap sighed. No one, least of all her parents, could figure out why she seemed so unenthused about a match that seemed to be perfect, at least on paper.

One sweltering summer afternoon, she and I went for ice cream and then headed home in a taxi. As we sat together, Pooja asked me what I thought it felt like when you loved someone so much you could marry them. I confessed that I wasn't sure, but that I felt it had to be more than *achcha sa.* "But marriage is different for everyone," I hedged. "People get married in all kinds of ways for all kinds of reasons. I don't know if one is better than the other."

Pooja looked at me, her eyes shining with determination. "I know who I'd want to marry, if I could marry anyone," she said. "Not the Apple King."

"Who?"

From her purse, she drew out her mobile and, scrolling through the saved photos, she showed me a picture of a young man, his hair spiky and gelled, sitting on the back of a motorcycle, smiling brightly and dressed in the white shirt and black jacket and tie that was the uniform of Pooja's law college. "He's my college friend," she said. "I really like him."

I had seen this young man a few times before; he sometimes dropped Pooja home from the law college on his motorcycle, and tooled around the area with his guitar slung across his back. He was a Jat Hindu boy who lived across the road in the Punjabi refugee neighborhood of Jai Singh Enclave. He seemed stylish, with his gelled hair and his habit of wearing his tie and

shirt collar askew, and moreover was fun-loving, progressive, and had a "good attitude" towards women, as Pooja described. "Once there were some *tharki* (sexually vulgar) boys outside the college making remarks at us," she said, "and he looked after me. He defended me." More importantly, as a fellow lawyer-in-training, he supported Pooja's career goals and could understand the pressures she faced as a middle-class young person, struggling to balance her ambition for a fulfilling career and a family on her own terms with the demands of her household and India's economic machinations. They snatched brief moments of time together in the college canteen, at practice for moot court and the law college's intermural cricket team, and on his motorbike going home from classes. The two spoke to each other outside of school clandestinely, teetering between simple friendship and their mutual attraction to one another. "I like him," Pooja said. "But we could never marry."

Indeed, there was no serious consideration of a real, public relationship. He was relegated to the category of *"timepass* boyfriend," a term I heard several other neighborhood girls use for boys to whom they were attracted, and sometimes flirted with, but who were not serious candidates for marriage. The term *timepass,* as it is used by young people in India, can denote the frivolity and fun of simply doing nothing *(timepass karna)*, but also highlight the liminality of youth in contemporary culture, conveying a sense of waiting for one's life to *really* begin (Jeffrey 2010). Pooja's use of the term seemed to highlight the ambiguity and threat that accompanied this season of her life; there was a seriousness behind this relationship, implied when she asked me not to gossip with any of her relatives about the law college boy. While the threat of danger that accompanies Hindu-Muslim romantic relationships in nationalist India was less apparent, Pooja ran a serious risk not only by engaging privately with a young man in defiance of her family's interpretation of gendered Rajput caste rules, but by engaging with a

young man who, in the spatial geography of central Jaipur, was continuously marked as *pardesi,* a foreign Punjabi, and a descendant of a displaced refugee family. I couldn't help but admire the determination that Pooja had showed in her pursuit of her batchmate and the many transgressions she committed as she did so. Even the acquisition of the secret phone, which she used not only to communicate with her admirer but also to post pictures and captions on her social media pages, was a defiant statement of an intention to maintain an inner life, which remained hers and hers alone.[32] She may not have been able to marry her batchmate, but neither did she marry the Apple King; the match fizzled out, and Pooja remained unmarried.

Love, desire, and joyous sexuality have intense political implications in any nationalist movement; the Hindu nationalist movement is particularly judicious in its control over women's sexuality. Pooja's admirer was Hindu, but a Jat; the presumed licentiousness of Jats, imbued from caste stereotyping and assumptions about Jats gleaned from North Indian popular culture, tinged Pooja's fears over how her parents would react and invokes the tropes both of the supposed working-class "roadside Romeos" who leer at respectable middle-class girls on the streets *and* the Muslim youth who is thought to be irresistible to Hindu women, as Charu Gupta (2018) has discussed. Hindu nationalists often describe Muslim men as irresistibly virile, strong, and attractive, with a body inherently sensual and unruly due to Muslim hygienic and dietary habits, particularly the consumption of meat.[33] The idea that a Hindu girl might desire a Muslim boy, sexually as well as romantically, colors much Hindu nationalist rhetoric around sexuality

[32] For more on the phone as mediator in love relationships and the inherent challenge posed to the normative conventions of romantic relationships in India, see Walter (2021).
[33] The unruliness of the Muslim, as well as Dalit, body stands as an ambiguous aspect of savarna conceptions of interfaith and intercaste love. Although the "unruliness" of such bodies is threatening and dangerous, it also imbues savarna partners with a liberatory sensation, at the expense of Muslim and Dalit autonomy. See Kisana (2023) on the rhetoric of savarna partners of Dalit daters on dating apps in urban areas, and Kang (2023) on the sexual practices of gay savarna men as mediated by caste. Many savarna lovers will feel a sense of freedom or liberation in sexual interactions with non-savarna sexual partners, but reinforce and reify caste hierarchies as they do so.

and Hindu family life. Fears of "love jihad," or Muslim boys seducing Hindu girls in order to convert them and thus deplete the number of potential Hindu wives and mothers, have led to violence against interfaith and intercaste couples, and have led to direct policymaking in states like Uttar Pradesh, where a 2020 ban on "love jihad" has essentially criminalized Hindu-Muslim love and sexuality.

Yet Hindu nationalist rhetoric recognizes, in its own way, the central irrepressibility of desire. During the controversy over the 2018 film *Padmaavat,* about the lust of a Muslim king for a virtuous Rajput queen, it was hard to miss the sexual overtones that existed in Hindu nationalists' paranoia over the film; Ranveer Singh, who played the king, played him as a bisexual libertine, wearing draped velvet fabrics that showed his muscled chest and glaring upwards underneath kohl-lined eyelashes. Casting Singh, a romantic hero who has starred as the male lead in many blockbuster Hindu films throughout the 2010s, and dressing and displaying him in a manner conducive to the female sexual gaze, may have contributed to the metatextual uproar around the film and its plotline; rumors abounded that the Rajput queen Padmavati would have an affair with the Muslim king Khilji in a dream sequence; even in a celluloid dream, transgressive love and desire can and will happen.

Yet such constriction and anxiety around the transgressive nature of female sexuality has done little to change how women actually think and feel about their desire. Many of the most popular actors of Hindi cinema have been Muslims, from the 1950s heartthrob Dilip Kumar (birth name Mohammed Yusuf Khan) to unconventional modern stars like Irfann Khan and Nawazuddin Siddiqui. Women particularly idolize Muslim film stars like Shahrukh Khan, Salman Khan, and Aamir Khan; for examples of successful Hindu-Muslim relationships and marriages, they need only look at the film industry, where many of these male Muslim actors are

married to Hindu women, though not without controversy.[34] Charu Gupta (2018) has written about the craze for the breathtakingly handsome Pakistani actor Fawad Khan amongst middle-class Hindu girls and women. Khan, who the gossip columnist Shobhaa De once described as an "irresistible Lahori kebab…*desi* ladies want"[35] (Gupta 2018), was most famous in Pakistan for his roles in family dramas and romantic serials—he had a firmly established career as a television leading man, generally playing wealthy, aspirational characters. In the same way, when he came to India, he was usually typecast as a worldly heartthrob. The roles Khan played in Bollywood, predominantly respectable romantic heroes, older brothers, and wealthy sons (and in one case, a Rajput prince), were those usually given to young Hindu actors like Sushant Singh Rajput, Rajkummar Rao, and Vicky Kaushal. Unlike more freewheeling actors like Ranbir Kapoor and Ranveer Singh, who tend to play sexy ne'er-do-wells and lovable scamps, Khan's characters exuded mature, respectable virility.

As a result, Khan's sexual attractiveness on screen, although apparent and popular amongst women, was more restrained than the sexuality that actors like Singh adopted in their portrayal of sexually attractive Muslims, and felt decidedly less fetishistic (De's characterization of him as a 'Lahori kebab' notwithstanding). Khan's portrayals of urbane, sophisticated men challenged both portrayals of Muslims as violent, fanatical, and abusive *and* of the Muslim male

[34] Shahrukh Khan and Aamir Khan are both married to Hindu women; Salman Khan has been linked to various Hindu actresses. Although these marriages are nominally accepted, they have often been the subject of Hindu nationalist agitation. The Hindu actress Kareena Kapoor, married to the Muslim actor Saif Ali Khan (himself the son of a Hindu woman and a Muslim man) was featured on the cover of *Himalaya Dhwani,* the newsmagazine of the Durga Vahini, for their issue on love jihad; a promotional photo of Kapoor was Photoshopped to display the actress wearing a burqa. The implication was that Kapoor, like other Hindu women "seduced" into marriage to Muslim men, would have her rights stripped away by a supposedly regressive Muslim society.

[35] De's fetishization of Khan's body invokes suggestions of both Muslim and dalit bodies as alluring but impure; the "Lahori kebab" is not only Pakistani and Muslim, but full of the fleshy matter associated with the ritual impurities that enforce caste hierarchy. The irony of writing about the generative possibilities of inter-caste and interfaith desire, while centering the experience of the savarna woman and the fetishization of these relationships present in Indian media, is not lost on me. Akhil Kang (2023) asks us: where is the dalit lover in these narratives of desire? Is the desire of the savarna woman that radical—or queer, as some scholars have suggested—if it winds up with the dalit or Muslim lover dead, and the supposed radical politics of the savarna lover centered?

body as overtly sensuous, unrestrained, or vulgar. Yet it was Khan who proved most threatening to the Hindu nationalist concern over women's sexuality and national health. De's characterization of Khan's sexual attractiveness appealing to *"desi"* ladies—rather than Indian ladies or Pakistani ladies or Bangla ladies or Nepali ladies, etc.—suggests a kind of extra-national dimension of Khan's good looks and the sexual response of female viewers. What to make, also, of Khan's deliberate casting as a figure of not just lust, but the possibilities of generous and intimate romantic love? Is it possible that women's desire for him, and the generative potential that desire can cause, had the power to threaten the nationalism of the Indian state? It seemed that the Hindu right, and their political supporters in the BJP, thought so.

After Khan's portrayal of a DJ romancing the actress Anushka Sharma in the 2016 film *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil,* there were increased calls for Pakistani artists to be banned from appearing in Indian films, particularly after the attack on Indian jawans in Uri not long after the film's release; Khan became the focal point of nationalist critiques, with the film critic Soumyadipta Bannerjee writing, "We drool over you…we know that you have a lot of support from Indians who would pamper you in isolation…you lack the guts to stand up against the Jihadists of your country…who are killing us." Despite the "we," Bannerjee implies that it is Indian women and their sexuality who are overlooking Khan's essential Muslimness and Pakistani identity, and his alleged support of border violence, to satisfy their own desires to gaze and consume Khan's face and body. Khan was eventually banned from performing in Indian films, along with other Pakistani artists, after the Uri attack. Yet Khan's popularity remains, with Indian women continuing to follow his success in film magazine and pirating Pakistani serials like *Humsafar* and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* in order to satisfy their attraction. I argue that the "Fawad craze" is an important turning point for Hindu nationalist agitation about women's desires, particularly those

desires which exist outside of the heterosexual nationalist paradigm, which became legible on a national scale as a result of Khan's national fame. The state's intervention into the sexual fantasies of Indian women (even as women continued to indulge those fantasies through the utter uncontrollability of transnational media) suggests both the As Perveez Mody (2022) has written, love and intimacy are always at the frontiers of what the state controls; nevertheless, it is of deep concern to states whose frantic regulation of "love's jurisdictions" deny its disruptive, generative, and transgressive possibilities even as it increases love's legibility through its making-visible love and desire's inherent disruptions. The desires of national subjects are not so easily controlled.

"She Looked Like She Wanted to Kill Him, and She Could Have Done It"

On a hot summer afternoon, my American friend Charlie, who was renting a room from Divya and Dev Pratap next door, went to Mirza Ismail Road to the Liberty Sports shop and purchased a basketball hoop, the small metal kind that attach to garage doors in American suburbs, and a new, taut basketball that smelled of chalky rubber. Charlie was from Los Angeles and was an avid Lakers fan, and was thrilled to find out that Divya had been a state-level women's basketball champion before her marriage. Knowing that Divya was often morose and depressed, he thought it would be a good idea to buy her the basketball and the hoop to try to lift her spirits during the hot, hazy Jaipur pre-monsoon summer.

Divya was thrilled with the present. "I haven't played in *years,"* she laughed. Dressed in a loose-fitting salwar kameez, the dupatta thrown over her shoulders, Divya spent most of the summer evenings dribbling around the cement courtyard in the back of the house, shooting free throws from an imaginary three-point line drawn in sidewalk chalk and playing games of

knockout with Pooja and Charlie. Everyone had fun with the basketball and the hoop except for Dev Pratap, who would sit in their bedroom watching television and staring glumly at his wife in the courtyard through the small bedroom window. "If it helps her lose weight, I guess it's all right," he sighed—he had been after her about her weight for years, calling her Baby Elephant constantly and snatching food off of her plate. "But I don't think it's right for her to be spending so much time playing that. She has a job to do—she should just…*do* it."

Dev Pratap was a dilettante who was always interested in something new—one week he was into photography, the next week into restoring old motorcycles, the week after that in going to the polo grounds and learning to play polo, despite his bad back. Unlike Narayan Singh, who was slow-moving, prone to injury and illness, and seemed to be all of his fifty-five years, Dev Pratap was constantly moving, always tooling around the city in search of novelty. At weddings and functions he was always the first to start dancing. He was so exuberantly full of life that visitors to the house often believed he was drunk. Because of this exuberance, the contrast between Dev Pratap and his soft-spoken, almost dour wife was incredibly sharp. Charlie suspected that this was not due to anything on Divya's end, for Dev Pratap strictly forbade Divya from doing anything that took away from her household role as wife and mother; he enforced this rule through a mixture of verbal harassment and by forbidding her from using the family's only motorbike. We had thought that basketball, which was strictly an at-home hobby, would be acceptable. Nevertheless, it too was forbidden. Narayan Singh, a more indulgent husband than his brother, and a keen observer of human foibles, summed up the lot of wives like Divya thus: "Before marriage, nothing but *masti* (pleasure). After marriage, nothing but *rasoi mirch namak* (kitchen, pepper, and salt)." The difference between the brothers' management of their wives' leisure time was stark. Aarti and Narayan Singh's part of the house was decorated with the

paintings and craft projects that Aarti had done shortly after her marriage, when she was taking courses in art and art history as part of a women's group; by contrast, Pooja couldn't remember ever seeing her mother play a game of basketball. That Dev Pratap would not allow his wife to cultivate a hobby she was good at and that brought her pleasure was a constant source of consternation to Charlie, who was very close to Divya (she often called him *beta,* "son," and was involved in the planning of his impending marriage to his Gujarati girlfriend). Aarti might quarrel with her husband, but Divya never dared; Pooja, who often claimed she "hated" her father because of his treatment of her mother, summed up her mother's personality as "she doesn't speak up," even when Dev Pratap's smothering marital restrictions clearly grated.

Late one night—and no one was quite sure how—the basketball hoop broke; it was found in the morning knocked down from the courtyard wall, twisted and bent beyond any hope of repair. Charlie was certain that Dev Pratap had done it out of jealousy. Dev Pratap denied it, saying that a harsh monsoon wind must have broken it in the middle of the night. Pooja, tired of being torn between her parents, refused to get involved. Divya and Dev Pratap's son Veer, who had always been his mother's protector, was working in Bangalore and could do little more than call every night to check on his mother's health and state of mind. I noticed that Divya seemed especially bereft, and took to kicking the now-deflated basketball up against the wall repeatedly while she washed dishes in the house's outdoor kitchen.

Although Dev Pratap claimed that he had not done anything to the basketball hoop, he was certainly happy that it was gone. "That's that!" he guffawed, and made a big show of taking the broken hoop up to the scrap metal shed he maintained on the roof of the house, where he dumped it with old bicycle tires and rusted cans of paint.

A few weeks after Dev Pratap threw away the basketball hoop, he was suddenly struck down with a stomach infection; he was unable to eat, go to work, or to do much besides lie in bed half-paying attention to the television. Other members of the family, which was famously sickly, suffered regularly from fevers and flus, but Dev Pratap was always healthy, so this was a rare and sudden event. Visits to the doctor were inconclusive; neither Divya nor Pooja had become ill. The illness was blamed on the famously negative effects of *bahar ka khana* (street food) or something that Dev Pratap had eaten or drunk at work; nevertheless, the illness changed the household dynamic to Divya's advantage. We could no longer hear him shouting for her or Pooja at night, to bring him dinner or a glass of water, since he could not work up the energy to scream. Even when he had recovered, he could only walk at a shuffle for some time, and his voice was subdued and low. It was hard to describe him as anything other than cowed, a weak facsimile of the man he had been a few weeks before. Divya now spent long hours on our side of the house, gossiping and watching television with Aarti, flipping through her magazines. Divya had moments of levity, but she had never seemed to me to be truly happy; this was the first time since she had questioned me about my romances that I saw her laugh regularly.

"Maybe it's a good thing," Pooja said, watching her mother laugh and joke. "He never asks my mother anything. Now she can take decisions on her own."

Later that week, Charlie told me a story about the scene that had occurred the night before Dev Pratap's mysterious illness had begun. Divya had been frying small *dosas* for dinner; South Indian food was a rare treat, and the mood was jubilant and celebratory, with the anticipation of a good meal ahead. I did not usually eat on that side of the house, so I had not been present for the meal. After serving Charlie, Divya had brought in two neatly folded *dosas* on a plate for Dev Pratap, with chutney and sambar; as she came in from the outdoor kitchen,

tucking the end of her saree into her waistband, Dev Pratap turned to Charlie and said, "Look at this greedy woman. She must have been eating in the kitchen instead of cooking, that's why it took so long. Do you see how fat she is? I've never seen a woman so fat."

The room instantly fell silent. Pooja and Charlie sat with mouths agape, watching the scene. It was not the first time that we had heard Dev Pratap castigate his wife like this, "but," Charlie said, "she looked angry for the first time. She looked like she wanted to kill him, and she could have done it."

I found it hard to believe that Divya, a woman who could be so painfully shy that Pooja sometimes had to hold her hand when they entered rooms together, could have been so angry, but the events were confirmed by the tight-lipped Pooja, who seemed unsettled by the whole affair, even as she approved of her mother "having a bit more confidence," as she put it. The palpable feeling of Divya's rage had seemed to permeate the family, and perhaps even Dev Pratap's own body, like a virus. Angry women have powers all their own. Perhaps Divya had put the evil eye, the *buri nazar,* on her husband, causing disease and misfortune. The countryside around Divya's natal city of Udaipur was full of stories of *dayan* and *chudail,* witches who practiced black magic and the spirits of enraged and jilted women who sought revenge on the sex that had slaughtered them; perhaps Divya had channeled some of that power. Perhaps she was like the ghostly dancing girl that Janaki claimed to have seen wandering the ruins of their ancestral haveli, her ankle bells jingling, swearing her revenge on all of the Champa Gaon Rathods, descendants of the man who had impregnated and abandoned her. Some people were more pragmatic and thought perhaps he had ingested something "wrong" for him—though no one would suggest Divya had actually *done* anything.

The avenging woman—the woman who fights or kills in order to exact her judgment on an abuser or an enemy—is well-known in Indian sociocultural life, from portrayals of avenging goddesses like Durga and Kali in Hindu worship to cinematic heroines like the enraged widow played by Vidya Balan in *Kahani* (2012), who dons a fake pregnancy belly and murders her way across Kolkata seeking vengeance for her husband's killing. The avenging woman also finds her place in politics, particularly in Hindu nationalist rhetoric, where the angry, empowered woman has become a symbol of right-wing feminism. Sucheta Mazumdar's interviews with Hindu nationalist women reveal how women members of the movement see themselves as uniquely suited to revolutionary anger, channeling the rage of the disempowered Hindu woman alongside the cosmological rage of the "angry Indian goddesses."

I thought of Divya's blossoming as a form of vengeance, but it seemed rhetorically different from the Hindu nationalist vengeance I had previously been working through intellectually. What distinguished Divya's rage from the other forms of women's political rage I encountered was its selfishness—not in any negative sense, but in its lack of productive use to anyone but her. Even Aarti's frequent castigations of Narayan Singh for his miserly frugality, or the constant tension between Janaki and her brother Sukhi over Sukhi's refusal to take his schooling, job search, or really anything seriously, were rooted in structures of gender, family, and class relations that had easy provenance in Hindu nationalist rhetoric of sociality. Of course any woman, regardless of her commitment to the nationalist cause, may have private angers that do not fit neatly into the paradigm of the enraged Hindutva woman. If those angers cannot be modulated, however, they must be sublimated to the rhetoric of the cause. The movement has seized upon women's anger and dissatisfaction with domestic abuse, economic stagnation, and lack of gender parity to frame itself, with its religious appeal to the "fierce" goddesses of

Hinduism and its constant comparisons to the lives of Muslim women in pardah, as an acceptable solution to and outlet for women's rage.[36] Such productive anger is also a characteristic of the prototypical Rajput woman, particularly the married Rajput woman; Lindsey Harlan (2007), discussing the *pativrata* (sacrificial wife) and *sati* (widow-burning) traditions of Rajput communities, has framed stories of Rajput women's sacred and productive anger towards men as examples of "positive renunciation"—like the Hindutva woman, the Rajput woman uses anger to protect her male relatives' caste identity, reminding them of the obligations of their caste masculinity while at the same time preserving the cosmological identity of the Rajput home (159).[37] I had certainly seen expressions of anger towards men from both Rathore and Singh women that matched Harlan's ritual paradigm; Sukhi's preference for video games over exercising and sports, and his yielding, passive nature, could drive Aarti to distraction. The most explosive argument between them centered around his refusal to kill a large, obnoxious rat that had been plaguing the house; witnessing Sukhi squeal and shriek as he poked ineffectually at the rat with a broom handle, Aarti stomped up, grabbed the broom from his hand, and smacked him around the ears, snarling "*Rajput hai tu?"* ("Are you a Rajput?") in rage. Sukhi's refusal to perform the regular interspecies violence that often appears in urban households—and the

[36] See, for example, the 2012 documentary *The World Before Her* (dir. Nisha Pahuja), which follows Prachi Trivedi, an early-twenties organizer with the Durga Vahini, the far-right women's paramilitary organization associated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Trivedi, homeschooled by an RSS careerist father, bristles under the brunt of his physical and emotional abuse, including talking about his desire to kill her at birth and branding her with an iron rod, and redirects her anger towards the anti-Muslim, anti-Christian rhetoric she utilizes in her organizational role. When asked about how she handles her father's brutal parenting, she merely smiles and says, *"Parishad."*

[37] Harlan sees Rajput women's anger towards men—often presenting as "disobedience" or dissatisfaction—as having a ritual function; focusing on traditions of the *satimata* ("*sati* mother"), women who are angry with their husbands for failing to perform an appropriate ritual function or to perform appropriate Rajput masculinity (through fighting, etc.) become living *satis,* who sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of caste preservation and their husband's wellbeing. See also Gold (1994) on Hadi Rani, the legendary Rajput Chauhan queen who beheaded herself to shame her husband into going to war against Aurangzeb in the late seventeenth century. A women's unit of the Rajasthan Police is named the Hadi Rani Mahila Battalion (Hadi Rani Ladies' Battalion).

inconvenience it created for Aarti, who was terrified of the rat—was therefore folded into a larger family disappointment around Sukhi's failure to appropriately perform Rajput masculinity.

No such larger structures were folded into Divya's anger towards her husband. In fact, the anger was deeply unsettling to the social order of the household, as evidenced by the perplexed, anxious reactions of other family members, and the attribution of supernatural powers to Divya's rage in the creation of her husband's illness. The tangibility of her anger unsettled and disturbed other family members, both male and female; even Pooja, who had spoken so often about her own frustration with her mother's passivity, was shaken by its power. It was harder to sublimate Divya's anger to a political imaginary that held the Hindu family together; rather, its manifestation was an indication of the Hindu family split apart. The rage of the Rathod women hung like a wild-haired *daiyan* over the house, and often was a kind of conduit for open expression between women, including myself; I was used to Pooja stomping over to my bedroom on many afternoons, flopping down on my bed, and letting loose a torrent of anger. "Are you writing it down?" she would ask me, as I tried to find a balance between sympathetic friend and anthropological witness.

This rage, apolitical and selfish, is deeply unruly and fraught, as likely to be harnessed into a political selfhood as anger that is political in its origin. As Sara Ahmed (2016) has indicated, the power of apolitical emotion is in fact key to the construction of political emotion; in her discussion of the rhetorical strategies of white nationalists in the United States, she points to the ways in which white nationalist groups seize on to emotions about aspects of one's life that might otherwise seem apolitical—difficult marriages, concern for one's children, or dissatisfaction with the achievement of life goals—in order to spark the emergence of a latent political self. Like many global right-wing organizations, Hindu nationalist organizations seek to

seize on to this kind of emotional anger and sublimate it to the cause. Sometimes, they are successful. Many women's auxiliaries serve as both spaces for political organizing and spaces for processing these feelings of grief, anxiety, and rage. As Tarini Bedi (2008) describes, part of the attraction of Hindu nationalist organizations like Shiv Sena for many working-class Hindu women is in its ability to create acceptable conditions for the expression of rage and grief, even rage and grief that is not in the service of a politics; this is a factor shared by many right-wing women's organizations across the world (see McGirr 2001, Schreiber 2016, Darby 2020). Militant women serve not only as comrades in the cause, but as sympathetic ears and parasocial maternal and sisterly presences. In fact, it is *these networks of understanding,* rather than the cause itself, that often lead women into militant organizations like Shiv Sena.

What happens, however, if this anger cannot be sublimated, redirected, or internalized? Some women choose to walk away, to take part in a politics of refusal that serves as a final kind of splitting apart of the family. This choice—to walk away—often becomes a space in which other women learn how to articulate their own feelings of desire, grief, anger, and longing, and articulate a nascent politics of resistance and refusal.

Walking Away From It All

Aarti had had her blood pressure taken at the doctor and it had been a scary number—168/100, well into the realm of severe hypertension. "Mrs. Rathod, you must reduce your salt intake immediately, or you will have a stroke before you're sixty years old," the family doctor Dr. Soni had told Aarti, who was so terrified that she had had a panic attack and begun to hyperventilate right in the examination room. Once home, she called Janaki, who was fanatically health-conscious, read all the latest articles about nutrition, and had been warning her parents for

years that the oily, salty gravies they preferred would eventually catch up with them. "Use less salt! More spices!" Janaki urged Aarti. "Just because it's not so salty doesn't mean it has to be bland." Under Janaki's tutelage, Aarti had halved the salt content of the *dal* and *kadhi pakode* she had served for dinner that night, much to the consternation of Narayan Singh. Decades of smoking had dulled his taste buds, and he made a big show of shaking salt into his bowl of *dal,* asking Sukhi and me, "Just because this lady's BP is high, we all have to suffer? My BP is fine. I don't know why I should worry."

Aarti came out of the kitchen shaking a knife at him. She had a smile on her face, but I got the distinct sense she wasn't entirely joking. "*Sahab*, I've given you twenty-seven years free service. Twenty-seven years and I haven't charged you a single rupee for a meal. All the foreigners say my food is good" (this was true—both I and the other Americans who passed through raved over her Rajasthani *dal baati,* her *pau bhaji,* her chow mein, and her egg curry) "and if you try it on with me, to *vides* I'll go." She turned to me. "*Beti,* let's you and I go to America and open a restaurant. You can do the books and I'll cook. And this old man can make Maggi and omelets for the rest of his life."

"Theek hai, budhiya, bhaag jao" ("Okay, old lady, run away"), Narayan Singh replied, snickering. The Hindi verb *bhaag jana,* meaning "to run away" or "to flee," holds heavy social connotations in upper-caste North Indian households, and it seemed to me that Narayan Singh invoked these connotations deliberately in teasing Aarti. *Bhaag jana* constantly occupies the minds of many Indian parents, including Narayan Singh and Aarti. This fear primarily takes the shape of concerns about romantic and sexual attachments, particularly for the parents of high-caste girls. Elopements with secret boyfriends and girlfriends are a worry; their marriageable children, under pressure to find a suitable spouse that may not be the partner they have in mind,

may choose to run off with partners who are unacceptable for reasons of class, caste, or religion. "Runaways," writes A.R. Vasnavi (2018), "defy the foundational principles of kinship relations…instead of natal-affinal links that are based on intense give and take, runaway relationships cause deep ruptures between families, castes, and communities (2)." A preeminent example of these ruptures is the preponderance of "love jihad kidnapping" cases in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where "forcible conversion" was criminalized under the Yogi Adityanath government in 2020. This new anti-conversion law did little more than criminalize interfaith relationships and marriages in the state, and was used by relatives accordingly. Muslim husbands and partners of Hindu women have been arrested under suspicion of kidnapping and forcibly marrying Hindu girls, as part of a long-term structural plan of seduction to weaken Hindu dominance through sexual imperialism. The conspiracy theory centering on this structural plan of seduction is known as *love jihad,* framing interfaith relationships as part of a terroristic strategy of dominance on behalf of Muslims, linking these relationships to the rhetoric of the global War on Terror.

News reports on these marriages generally emphasize the disapproval of families and forays into violence in attempts to get back "wayward" daughters especially. Yet many of the Hindu girls who were claimed by their families to have been "kidnapped" and forced into marriage were in fact runaways, who protested their treatment by police and reaffirmed their consent to their marriages even as cases against their Muslim husbands progressed.[38] The crime committed in "love jihad" cases is not a crime against the woman, but against family networks that regulate the sexual behavior of young people, particularly young women, and which

[38] The law went into effect in Uttar Pradesh in December 2020; one month later, in January 2021, 14 cases had been registered in the state and 49 men arrested. Of those 14 cases, only two were registered by the woman in question herself; all others were lodged by the Hindu wife's natal family. With the exception of a single case, all women in question were legal adults, able to fully consent to marriage under Indian civil law.

equivocate the economic and social strength of family networks with the willingness of young people to refrain from unsanctioned behavior, both sexual and nonsexual. Interviews with Hindu vigilantes who break up interfaith marriages, often under threat of violence, emphasize running away as a social rather than individual crime. Both the Muslim man and Hindu woman are criminals—the Muslim man against Hindu supremacist conventions on sexual purity, and the Hindu woman against the very social body that constrains her individual choices both sexual and nonsexual.[39]

Running away therefore represents a break not only with individual expectations, but an entire affective network of relationality; this network extends beyond concerns around acceptable sexuality, which may be why I heard it echoed so often when talking about a longing for a "clean break" from family networks that women were both inherently drawn to and repulsed by. There was sometimes, but not always, a connotation of free sexuality; as in the case of Aarti's fantasies of running away to become a restaurant maven, the fantasy may only represent a break from the enmeshments of one's everyday life. Once, Pooja and I stood outside her front gate, waiting for an autorickshaw to pass by to pick us up. Dressed to kill in tight jeans and crisp white cotton blouse, she regarded me over her sunglasses. I was preparing to return to Delhi in a few days, and she had asked to go with me; her parents had not permitted her to travel out of concern for her safety in the chaotic capital. This had made her introspective and resentful. "Sometimes I think I would like to run away from this house," she said to me, "but where would

[39] Take, for example, the case of Sanjay Shukla, a low-level Vishwa Hindu Parishad worker in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, who was interviewed by *The Intercept* about his work assisting the families of female Hindu runaways by tracking and locating the women. Speaking of his current case working with the family of a twenty-seven-year-old upper-caste woman who had eloped with a Muslim paralegal, Shukla told *The Intercept:* "Her parents have a big house and gave her every comfort. Why would she go with a Muslim who is a *munshi* to some lawyer? Do your parents raise you to shame them in their old age? We have to get the woman back in our control…we have to save her and Hindu society." Shukla acknowledges that the woman eloped of her own free will; however, he condemns the implicit economic and social crime of the mixed-religion, mixed-caste, mixed-class marriage amongst upper-caste Hindu social and kinship networks.

I go? I know no one except my family. And those I do know, they would bring me back to my family right away. And then what would they do to me?" She picked at a stray piece of lint on her shirt. "Just get me married off." As in our previous conversations, Pooja seemed always to be looking forward to the inevitability of her kind of social death and her retreat into the networks of enmeshment that brought her both joy and intensely-felt pain.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, the family experienced a successfully achieved case of *bhaag jana,* occurring not in Laxmi Gardens, but in Janaki's marital district of Padmini Nagar. Sonakshi was a friend of Janaki's who lived with her husband Arjun and his family near Janaki's marital household in Padmini Nagar; Aarti and Sonakshi's father were distant cousins. I had met Sonakshi only a few times at birthday functions and holidays like Holi; she was a placid-faced, extraordinarily quiet woman with a habit of pulling her dupatta or the end of her saree over the side of her face as if to curtain herself off from the rest of the gathering. She and Arjun were the parents of Kiran, who was four years old, and although the little girl was adored and cherished by Arjun's family, the fact that there were, at that time, no more children in the family (especially no boys) was a source of some consternation. Janaki had become close to Sonakshi as two young daughters-in-law; they spent their days running the household together, taking care of their in-laws. In Arjun's family home the burden of household labor fell disproportionately on Sonakshi, whose husband was less permissive than Janaki's husband Ashok, and did not have Janaki's educational and family pedigree to fall back on. The last time I had seen her, during her Holi visit to the house, she had seemed run down, sitting with a blank expression on her face as her daughter and the younger Rathod cousins doused her with colored powder.

Sonakshi was from the dusty northwestern city of Bikaner, close to the Pakistani border, and unlike Janaki, who often came home for Gangaur and Hariyali Tij,[40] she could not go home to her parents as often as she might like. A few days before I was to take Sonakshi's interview for this project, news came from Bikaner that her father, a healthy, vivacious man in his fifties, had died suddenly of a brain aneurysm. "He fell over and just…*died,"* Janaki told me, indicating the suddenness and shock of his death with a sweeping gesture of her palms. In a family whose hunger for stories about freak accidents and bizarre deaths was insatiable, the death of Sonakshi's father took on almost mythic proportions, repeated to a long chain of relatives over the phone for the next few days. That such a young, vibrant man should be struck down in his prime seemed to affect everyone deeply. Sonakshi's grief, I was told, was unimaginable. Taking Kiran, she left immediately for Bikaner where, I was told, she would stay through the end of the month. "You can take her interview then," Janaki told me, although I determined to wait a few weeks after Sonakshi returned to the city to press the issue.

July came and went, and I heard nothing else about Sonakshi or her return to Jaipur. Periodically I wondered what was going on but, fearing that I might be letting my ethnographic drive get in the way of her grieving process, I said nothing about it. I sometimes heard Aarti talking about her on the phone to her friends when she was alone in the living room; if I happened to be in the room, she would switch to the rapidfire Marwadi dialect that she often used to obscure information. Whatever was going on, it seemed that I was not to know. It was the middle of August when I thought to bring up Sonakshi, when Janaki came to the house for

[40] These are two puberty festivals respectively celebrated in mid-spring (April to May) and late summer (August to September) in Rajasthan and other parts of North India. It is common for married women to return to their natal households for a visit during those festivals, which are particularly auspicious for wives and women seeking to get married.

Hariyali Tij. I had hoped that Sonakshi might stop by and bring Kiran, who I liked very much. "How is Sonakshi doing?" I asked Janaki. "How was her visit to Bikaner?"

Immediately Janaki screwed up her face and shook her head in defeat. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask. She hasn't come back from Bikaner yet! She called Arjun and said, 'I don't know when I'm coming back, but it won't be next week, or next month.' *Bhag gayi pagli* (She ran off, the crazy girl)." Janaki was angry; her fists were tensed and her jaw was set. "Sorry that you can't take her interview."

"It's all right."

"Well, no, it's not. She promised she would help you with her project, and she didn't! It's very rude." No matter how much I reassured Janaki that I wasn't upset, she seemed to be unable to let it go. In truth, I had admired Sonakshi's skillfulness in achieving what it seemed like she had long desired—a clean break with her daughter from the traumatic experience of living with her in-laws, who, despite a professed interest in family reform and mutuality, had seemed to delight in nothing more than wearing down their daughters-in-law.[41] *Good for her* was my private thinking, although I was mortified over Janaki's unhappiness.

After I had returned to the United States, I was able to piece together details from speaking to Janaki and Pooja over WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. She had herself just finished a months-long on-again off-again fight with her husband Ashok while he had been abroad in Europe a few months earlier, and she had engaged in her own kind of informal *bhag*

[41] When I met Sonakshi at her marital household for the first time in December 2018, I was introduced in turn to Sonakshi, Arjun, Arjun's brothers and their wives, and Arjun's mother Basant Kunwar, who I usually called Mummy. When I returned to the house a few weeks later to take an interview with a wife of Arjun's brother, Mummy insisted on sitting in the parlor where we were conducting the interview. I explained to her that I liked to take interviews with just the interviewee if I could, and she insisted that it was important that she remain in the interview in case her daughter-in-law used any Marwadi terms I did not know. The bahu seemed nervous, and I could not help but feel that we were being monitored. As a result, most of our conversations about this project were taken at the Rathod house or at Janaki's marital house, where women felt more comfortable and where we had more privacy.

jana over the summer, spending weeks at a time with us in her natal household. Rumors flew amongst the Americans in the house that she might seriously be considering asking for a divorce, although we were ourselves too nervous to bring it up to her. It would certainly have been unthinkable amongst the older members of her family. A tentative reconciliation had been achieved when she had discovered her pregnancy in July, although I was not aware of this when Sonakshi ran away. With Sonakshi gone, Janaki was now pregnant in an environment in which she felt utterly bereft of an ally, even her husband, who was generally a kind-hearted person but who had faced his own pressures around family and obligation.[42] The patterns between Aarti and Divya that had emerged in Janaki's own childhood around the politics of domestic refusal—Aarti's refusal to act as a proper daughter-in-law in the household, and the subsequent anger and envy that it awoke in Divya—were being reproduced in the sphere of Janaki's close-knit but contentious relationship with a fellow daughter-in-law, and in Sonakshi's acknowledgment, in the midst of grief over the loss of her own familial ally, that the center ultimately could not hold.

While the women of Laxmi Gardens often talked about their approval of the Hindutva ideology of the family, and endeavored to teach their daughters the same, the frustration and anxiety that has been discussed in previous chapters sometimes allowed fissures to appear in ways that subverted even the political consciousness of women themselves. This includes the cultivation of unruly desires and open rejection of interpersonal pressures that pushed women towards unhappiness and despair. In some cases, women, not content to merely imagine these lifeworlds, set out to create alternatives of their own, at great personal and familial risk. As much as women struggled to find a place in a world which alternative felt confusing, threatening, and

[42] See Osella (2012) on the complex relationships between sisters-in-law and the comparative lack of intimacy between husbands and wives. I am grateful to insights from Karishma Mangliani and Sukhmann Bajwa on the traumatic nature of the marital household, and the marital experience generally, for many South Asian women.

violent, intentional creation of spaces of joy challenged not only their own individual circumstances, but implicitly laid a challenge towards the constricting dynamic of Hindu nationalist politics.

EPILOGUE

GIRL MEETS THE WORLD, GIRL GETS IT

My baby loves me
I'm so angry
Anger makes me a modern girl
I took my money, I couldn't buy nothing
I'm sick of this brave new world
--Sleater-Kinney, "Modern Girl" (2005)

I had intended to return to Jaipur in the spring of 2020 in order to conduct follow-ups with the Rathods, but the pandemic meant that we mostly spent time talking to each other over WhatsApp, updating each other about the latest news—how many people we knew who were sick or whether or movie theaters were open. "No fun here!" Pooja wrote me mournfully, when I told her I had heard our favorite mall has closed due to the national lockdown. Jaipur was hit especially hard and especially early by COVID-19, brought in by a ragtag group of Italian tourists staying near Janaki's house in Padmini Nagar. Janaki had Harshvardhan, her infant son, to keep from getting sick, so she did not have much time for introspection or self-invention; Veer was stuck in Bangalore with his girlfriend, who he would marry later on that year. Pooja and Sukhi watched old movies, were excited that Doordarshan was rebroadcasting the 1988 *Ramayana* miniseries, were trying to teach themselves how to cook. Aarti and Divya sent me messages with homemade remedies to prevent infection—eat two cloves of garlic every day, burn camphor in my living room to kill disease, hold my nose and drink tinctures of turmeric and black pepper. Even as I began to write and think about all we had experienced together throughout 2019, turning conversations into analysis and analysis into conclusions about the state of the world, I felt connected to Pooja and the Rathods still, linked together in our mutual experience of figuring out what the pandemic, and the stagnation it provided, meant for us. I thought about a phrase that Aarti had once used to describe the conditions of her life as she

watched her Youtube videos and her soap operas—*beithe beithe ghoomna* (wandering while sitting, wandering while still).

The situation at home drew me away from thinking about India for quite some time. Preoccupied with family problems and the psychological toll of the pandemic, theory drifted from my mind, even as I plugged away at writing. Eventually, I expanded my research interests to include the role of women in more homegrown forms of extremism—American housewives involved in QAnon, and wellness gurus involved in the anti-vaccine movement. Although these women emerged from vastly different contexts than the women I had known in India, their concerns resonated with the themes of longing, frustration, and a relentless search for selfhood and meaning that I had spent so much time thinking about in India. "Those women are crazy," Pooja informed me. "Why would you not get a vaccine? The PM himself has told us it's safe." Still, there were plenty of connections I could draw. I remembered that it had been a casual discussion about QAnon, conducted in English, that had led Pooja to inform me that Feroze Gandhi, the husband of Indira Gandhi and the grandfather of poor Rahul Pappu, had been a secret Muslim sent by the Pakistanis to infiltrate the Indian government. "Not everything that sounds crazy is actually crazy," she had said. "You should spend some more time actually listening. Bad things happen everywhere." Then she had giggled.

"Are you making fun of me?" I had asked her.

"No, I mean it. By God, you're so *serious.*"

I was in a Hindi class on Zoom, reading some sections of this dissertation that I had translated as an exercise, when rioters stormed the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. Later that night, eating Chinese food on the couch, I watched footage of Ashli Babbitt, one of two women to die at the Capitol that day, attempt to storm into the Speaker's Lobby and fall

back in a bloody heap as she was shot by a Capitol Police officer. (Two of the four rioters to die at the Capitol that day were women. Both were in their mid-thirties and had not previously been political before becoming involved in QAnon and Trumpist politics. The other woman, Roseanne Boyland, was trampled to death by her fellow rioters).

I felt the urge to learn more about Babbitt. The next day, I read that she was a military veteran who had fallen into a bad place after a nasty divorce and the failure of the pool-supply business she owned. Prior to her death, she had posted anguished messages on Twitter, bemoaning the state of Californian politicians: "What have you done? Where are you? You're not even here. You can consider yourself put on notice, me and the American people. I am so tired of this. This is absolutely unbelievable. Get your shit together." Her brother told the *New York Times:* "If you feel like you gave the majority of your life to your country and you're not being listened to, that is a hard pill to swallow…my sister was a normal Californian. The issues she was mad about were the things all of us were mad about" (Barry, Bogel-Burroughs and Philipps, "Woman Killed in Capitol"). In the ensuing years, Babbitt has become a martyr for the cause of the extreme American right-wing, given glowing profiles on Tucker Carlson's primetime show and receiving a shoutout from Donald Trump himself, who made a video in her honor. But the day she died in the Capitol, she was a normal Californian, a woman with a bad ex-husband and a failing business, a woman who had not previously been a political extremist, who was so sure she had not received what she was owed that she was willing to die for it.

Perhaps the life and death of Ashli Babbitt is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I'm not so sure it is. Perhaps she represents the zenith of the woman whose confusion is so great, whose frustration is so earth-shattering, whose rage is so smoldering, that she begins to think and do things she might not otherwise. Thousands of women continue to find themselves in this position

all over the world. They show up in chat rooms and in living rooms and in front of school boards and city council meetings and in your Instagram feed. They show up outside of middle schools to harass trans children and their parents. They burn and ban books. They are mothers and wives and they just get so angry! Why does the world feel so strange and uncomfortable, and why do they feel so alone and confused? And sometimes, those feelings bubble over so fiercely that they are willing, as Ashli Babbitt was, to kill and to die.

Yet the essential driving emotion of these women, as Sara Ahmed (2016) has pointed out, is not this rage, but a search for pleasure and love. QAnon, the anti-vaccine movement, the Hindutva conspiracies that drive lynchings and riots, are all essentially utopian. They hold that, with the right amount of organization and work, the best of all possible worlds is just a few heartbeats away. For QAnon, this involves the summary executions of all public left-wing figures and the violent reorganization of the social order in the image of Christian nationalism. The anti-vaccine movement might like to add public health officials to that list. Hindutva pursues Muslims and Dalits daring to exist in public life, or who claim autonomous authority over their lives. The women that espouse these views may not commit the violence themselves—they may leave that to the men or the unmarried women—but within the private space of their homes and amongst their networks of support, they commiserate in their frustration that the beautiful world that is just out of reach has not yet come to fruition. Nevertheless, their conception of the world's teleology holds that, once everyone in their way has been purged, their frustrations and their rage will disappear. They will be free to flourish, to grow, to feel more like themselves, becoming happy women with happy marriages and happy children. They will have access to the goods that will make their life easier and more beautiful. They will no longer be mocked or feel ashamed, but will be respected and powerful, as they deserve. Those conversations, and those shared

commiserations, and the hopefulness that emerges, allow the violence, when it comes to pass, to proceed unchecked. Such feelings are common amongst we alienated moderns, but they are also hallmarks of the evolution of contemporary extremist politics, which are essentially a conception of a liberatory utopian politics whose roots, for those unlucky Muslims/Dalits/Jews/leftists who cannot fit into this new world, are in violence and in death.

I have used the term Hindutva feminism in this dissertation to draw attention to this liberatory language and conceptions of politics; the women I worked with in Jaipur often spent less time fantasizing about the violent repression of Muslims and other religious minorities and more time fantasizing about what it would be like to be fully self-actualized. They saw in the contemporary Hindu nationalist movement, which primarily operates in the utopian mood, as a way to achieve those goals of self-actualization and liberation, in the same way that millions of Indians did, as they returned the BJP again and again to power in local and state elections even as the economy slowed and communal violence got worse. It is not hard to see why, in a politics where this goal is always slightly out of reach and that is always predicated on the potential for future violence, these two realities, which might seemingly exist in tension with one another, manage to function so well. The sparkling technofuture that the Modi government promotes as part of its policy of removing self-government in autonomy in Kashmir, where every good Hindu can invest in the Valley and improve the economy a little bit while reifying the supremacy of the Hindu state, offers a vision of pure goodness to those who are able to access it. For beleaguered people who feel that Modi is speaking to them, this is a tempting possibility indeed. Modi is a hero, a worker who seeks to protect those he loves from harm and bring about better futures. His beatific visage smiles down from signboards and handbills promising cleaner water, cleaner streets, better investments, more opportunities for women. The mood in India is overwhelmingly

positive, if you're not Muslim or Dalit or Kashmiri. Life can be pretty good. Even for the nonviolent, this is a future that might be worth killing for.

I checked back in with Pooja recently, after a couple of months of not speaking. From looking at her Instagram, she seemed happy. She had picked up the job that her cousin Sukhi hadn't wanted, working as her uncle's agent in Champa Gaon, visiting hospitals and attending the opening of schools. Her brother Veer had married Ambika, a Rajput woman he worked with in Bangalore, a beautiful fellow engineer who seemed to immediately click with Pooja. When Ambika became pregnant, she and Veer moved back to Jaipur, and Pooja and Ambika got their nails done together, went shopping, went out to dinner. They paid for Aarti and Divya to get their hair and makeup done, and took them to tea at the neighborhood heritage hotel, wearing matching pink outfits. Ambika gave birth to a daughter on whom Pooja and the whole family doted. The older adults were so happy to have Ambika and Veer's daughter Shanti and Janaki and Ashok's son Harshvardhan that they didn't think to bother Pooja about getting married. Pooja, Ambika, Janaki, and Sukhi went out to Jaipur's nightclubs together, their arms looped around each other, holding each other tightly, fiercely. Pooja seemed so happy that I didn't want to ask about Kashmir, the aftereffects of COVID-19, the raiding of journalists' offices and homes. Who was I to bother her with all that?

"How are you doing really?" I asked her.

And she replied "You know what? It's a beautiful world out there."

And I thought of her, putting on her jeans and top and heading out into a beautiful future that was hers alone. No one was hurt. No one was dying. In the end, it was a pretty good story. Girl meets the world, girl gets it.

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